

# **Biblical Understanding and Response to Postpartum Depression**

Christiana Vogtsberger

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## Abstract

Title: Biblical Understanding and Response to Postpartum Depression  
Author: Christiana Vogtsberger  
Degree: Master of Arts in Biblical Counseling  
Date: May 2022  
Advisor: Jamaica F. Groover-Skelton

Postpartum depression is something many women experience after having a child. Women who struggle with postpartum depression can experience a variety of symptoms which include but are not limited to the following: disappointment, sadness, sorrow, and suicidal thinking.

For Christian mothers it is very important they be grounded in the Word of God and learn how to obey God during this difficult time in their lives. The Bible provides hope, help and encouragement to the mothers who are struggling with adjusting to their new lives with a newborn baby, while waiting for their bodies to heal after childbirth.

This project is meant to be a guide for both the biblical counselor and laymen in the church who are seeking to minister to and understand those who are struggling with postpartum depression. It will also help me in my personal growth by allowing me to cultivate a deeper understanding of postpartum depression from a biblical perspective as I am ministering to my counselees. Furthermore, it will provide me with a renewed perspective as I look back at my own experience with postpartum depression after having my daughter almost twenty years ago.

## I. Introduction

### A. Purpose Statement

1. The purpose of this thesis is to equip biblical counselors so they can better support and help Christian mothers who are suffering with postpartum depression. It can be used as a helpful guide for those desiring to have a biblical approach to postpartum depression and the ways it impacts Christian mothers.
2. Postpartum depression is similar to other types of depression listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, (DSM-5) and it is largely diagnosed based on how mothers feel regardless of their faith beliefs.<sup>1</sup>
3. Many cases of women struggling with postpartum depression go unreported because of the stigma that comes with it. Having a baby should be a happy time in life and not one of depression.<sup>2</sup> Studies also show that fathers can experience postpartum depression – the number is about 10% of new fathers.<sup>3</sup>
4. Studies have also shown that psychotherapy can be more effective than the traditional medication mothers are typically prescribed. However, it is very common that the mothers are not given any other option other than medication, which many decide not to take because they are either breastfeeding or they can't take medication.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “PsychCentral.” All about postpartum Depression. Accessed April 2, 2022.  
<https://psychcentral.com/depression/postpartum-depression#symptoms>.

<sup>2</sup> “American Psychological Association.” Treating postpartum depression. Accessed April 2, 2022.  
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/02/postpartum>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

5. Many Christian mothers who struggle with postpartum depression do so alone. They wrongly believe that they "...need to smile and go on in life, they are not to keep living panicky moment after moment in days."<sup>5</sup>
6. Many Christian mothers who struggle with postpartum depression were active members of their churches before they had their child and participated in church activities while living a Christ centered marriage.<sup>6</sup>
7. In some cases, Christian mothers after having a baby lose sight of their identity in Christ and instead, they are focusing on how to raise their child without making any mistakes. Their expectations of a perfect pregnancy and perfect baby do not always come true. As a result, they are left questioning God's goodness and even their purpose of living.<sup>7</sup>
8. Instead of referring the Christian mothers to psychiatrists and psychologists, ministers of the gospel and lay counselors are to help these women and their families using the Word of God, as the Scriptures are "...competent to counsel from."<sup>8</sup> The Word of God is sufficient and should be authoritative on these matters more than worldly theories and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

## B. Intended Audience and Scope

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<sup>5</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. "Postpartum Depression." Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

<sup>6</sup> Heath Lambert, "Sarah" and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. "Postpartum Depression." Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

<sup>8</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.18.

1. The intended audience is for pastors, counselors and laypeople who desire to gain a biblical perspective on postpartum depression and how they can use the Word of God to comfort Christian mothers who struggle after having children.
2. In addition, this research can be a useful tool for husbands, close family members and friends in learning how to best support Christian mothers. In addition, this research might be helpful for Christian mothers to read during their pregnancies so they can have a better understanding of postpartum depression.
3. This research will provide homework and specific passages from the Word of God to help, support, and give hope to the Christian mothers who struggle with postpartum depression.
4. The intent of this research is to equip biblical counselors, pastors, and husbands on what the Word of God teaches about postpartum depression. The Bible has the answers to help Christian mothers who are struggling with postpartum depression and the secular world and DSM-V do not have sufficient answers.

### C. Definition of Terminology

1. There are three categories of postpartum depression. The first one, called postpartum blues, usually starts 2-3 days after the baby is born and the symptoms last for about a week. The range of women who struggle with symptoms is 40-80%. Symptoms are: “mood swings from elation to sadness, irritability, anxiety, decrease in concentration, insomnia, tearfulness and crying spells.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. “Postpartum Depression.” Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

2. The second category, postpartum depression, starts during the first month after delivery. Some of the symptoms such as anxiety, anger, irritability, guilt and feeling overwhelmed are the same as depression.<sup>11</sup> The number of women who suffer from postpartum depression is anywhere from 5-9%. The number would have been higher if it was reported as studies have shown under reporting of the issue.<sup>12</sup>
3. The third category, postpartum psychosis, affects 0.1-0.2% of mothers. Symptoms are: “...disturbance in an individual’s perception of reality, delusions, and hallucinations.”<sup>13</sup>

#### D. Research Methodology

1. Majority of my research will be done through books, internet searches and journal articles.

## II. Defining the Problem

In this section we will address the problem of postpartum depression within the church and the significance in approaching the topic with a biblical perspective and not from a secular perspective.

#### A. Lack of Understanding / Clarifying the Issue

1. Unfortunately, the approach of how to deal with postpartum depression within the church has been largely influenced by secular psychology and/or integrated psychology.

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<sup>11</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. “Postpartum Depression.” Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The Bible does have answers regarding postpartum depression, but the American Psychiatric Association has become a “fierce secular competitor.”<sup>14</sup>

2. Even though many Christian mothers suffer from postpartum depression, doctors and other experts in the field have no conclusive data on the causes.<sup>15</sup> Secular psychology does not answer the question of why postpartum depression happens.<sup>16</sup> Many secular professionals have met and diagnosed postpartum depression based on the mothers’ symptoms and have attempted to find a medical cause.<sup>17</sup> Their solutions include the following: discussion of symptoms, experimentation of different medications and the application of other peoples’ theories of how this issue is solved.<sup>18</sup>
3. Having a biblical view of postpartum depression is necessary and Christian mothers should rely on the Word of God for answers. Christian mothers need to be reminded that their hope is found in God (Rom. 15:13). At the same time, they are not the only ones who are going through this suffering/trial, and they are to stay focused on God because He is faithful (1 Cor. 10:13).

## B. The Complexity of Postpartum Depression

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<sup>14</sup> Heath Lambert, “Sarah” and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 90.

<sup>15</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. “Postpartum Depression.” Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

<sup>16</sup> Heath Lambert, “Sarah” and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

1. Some people might disagree with the idea that the Word of God can help with postpartum depression. Conversely, biblical counseling can help with the emotional, theological, and physical aspects of postpartum depression.
2. Postpartum depression can be a very challenging and complex issue to approach and at many times it can be intimidating to counsel those who suffer from it. There are a variety of symptoms, feelings, and emotions mixed in with theological beliefs.<sup>19</sup>
3. Some of the wrong theological beliefs are the following (especially when there is a health issue with the newborn baby). However, many other Christian mothers think this way:<sup>20</sup>
  - a) questioning God and being angry at Him because expectations were not met
  - b) feeling guilty for asking God those questions
  - c) not having joy – and as a Christian we should be joyful during all times
  - d) worrying that this new addition to the family is too much to handle and God made a mistake
  - e) feeling inadequate to properly mother
  - f) doubting what to do in certain situations
  - g) ashamed to ask for help
  - h) wanting to die and be with God in order to avoid the suffering caused by seeing her child suffer.

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<sup>19</sup> Heath Lambert, “Sarah” and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 92.

<sup>20</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. “Postpartum Depression.” Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

- i) shame because of the wrongly belief that it is all up to her to be better and she needs to fix everything – especially the health issues with the newborn baby
  - j) feeling unloved and completely alone
  - k) Christians do not doubt God
  - l) how can God allow this trial after all the work the Christian mothers have been doing for Him
  - m) Christians are strong, brave, and obedient
  - n) when things are not good, they smile and fight on
4. The symptoms listed above are not all biologically caused, which means postpartum depression should not be treated strictly as a medical issue. As Christians, we are not to be intimidated by the “...psychological lingo” the secular professionals use and by “...the technical-sounding labels and drug therapies.”<sup>21</sup>
5. Postpartum depression is typically diagnosed based on the feelings of the one who is struggling with it. New mothers, regardless of their faith, have thinking, actions and emotions that are different from before giving birth.<sup>22</sup> Physical issues like levels of hormones, endocrine system and lack of some vitamins are tested first to rule out any organic or biological issues.<sup>23 24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Heath Lambert, “Sarah” and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 92

<sup>22</sup> Marshall Asher and Mary Asher, *The Christian's Guide to Psychological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bemidji, Minn.: Focus Pub., 2014, 2004), 134

<sup>23</sup> Heath Lambert, “Sarah” and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 91.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

6. Some of the risk factors that biblical counselors, pastors, and family need to be aware of are:<sup>25</sup>
- a) health issues with the newborn baby
  - b) not able to breastfeed the baby and/or not be able to produce enough milk
  - c) lack of sleep – for the mother and the baby
  - d) having no family close by who can help out with the care of the baby
  - e) health issues with the mother as she is recovering from giving birth; either having a C-section and/or still being on pain medication after the delivery
  - f) additional financial struggle
  - g) lack of support and help from the husband – either because he does not know how or because he is working too much
  - h) not able to balance the life with the newborn baby and the other children
  - i) not having a church family and support to help out with meals, cleaning the house and helping with the older children
  - j) feeling tired all the time
7. As we are addressing theological issues, we are to help them figure out how to practically deal with some of the struggles mentioned in the list above. They need our love, support, biblical teaching and comfort and not just our judgment and correction.
8. The Bible teaches us not to lose heart; and that a person is both soul and body, the inner man and the outer man (2 Cor. 4:16). The inner man affects the outer man as out of the heart, the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). During this time, Christian mothers are to pray

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<sup>25</sup> Wickert, Dan and Wallace Jocely. “Postpartum Depression.” Paper presented at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference, Lafayette, Indiana.

asking God to reveal any sin that might be hiding in their hearts that this trial brought to the surface (Psalm 139:23-24). Perfectionism, bitterness, anger, and anxiety can be revealed when the birth and postpartum process does not meet their expectations. Some women also struggle with fear of man and pride which can hinder them in pursuing help in their time of need.

9. In order to help Christian mothers, we need to figure out what is going on in their hearts and in their bodies.

### C. Importance of Understanding Postpartum Depression

1. How do we respond to someone in our church who is struggling after having a baby? Do we suggest, by the lack of words, they should be thankful and ignore their struggles? Do we bring up other women who struggle with infertility, and the ones who consider adoption? Is our church a welcoming place and open to hear the struggles many new mothers have? Or do we suggest they need to see a psychiatrist or psychologist? Do we know our Bible well enough to be able to help these women?
2. Christian mothers who struggle with postpartum depression are to be viewed as both a sufferer as well as a sinner. They need encouragement, support without judgment and comfort.<sup>26</sup> Pastors, biblical counselors, and family are to treat Christian mothers as sufferers who are struggling and need comfort during this time and as sinners as their sins are coming to light after their pregnancies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Heath Lambert, "Sarah" and Postpartum Depression, in *Counseling the Hard Cases, True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert (B&H Publishing Group, 2015). 94.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, & Sinners*. (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 8.

3. One of the first things that can be done to support Christian mothers is to help them to keep their eyes on God. Support can be given by making sure they have right theology and practical help on how to have the right living in response to that theology (Phil. 4:4-8). They need others to love them, support them and walk beside them as they are going through this trial. (1 Thess. 5:14-15).

### III. The Secular View of Postpartum Depression

This section will focus on how the secular field of psychology views postpartum depression, what the diagnosis process is, and what solutions are used.

#### A. The Secular Definition

1. Postpartum Depression – According to the American Psychological Association dictionary, postpartum depression is defined as a “serious mood disorder” which affects 1 in every 7 women after giving birth.
  - a. Postpartum depression is more serious than the “baby blues” also called “postpartum blues” which are feelings of sadness, anxiety, loneliness, tiredness and feeling stressed out.<sup>28</sup> The symptoms of postpartum depression do not go away after a few weeks like the “baby blues” symptoms.<sup>29</sup>
  - b. The symptoms of “...inadequacy, sadness, hopelessness, pessimism, irritability, apprehension, and decreased interest” prevent Christian mothers from enjoying normal daily activities.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “American Psychological Association.” What is postpartum depression & anxiety? Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/resources/reports/postpartum-depression>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall Asher and Mary Asher, *The Christian’s Guide to Psychological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bemidji, Minn.: Focus Pub., 2014, 2004), 134

- c. Postpartum depression symptoms can last anywhere from days to months and can affect daily living, especially the ability of the mother to make decisions of how she takes care of herself and/of the baby.<sup>31</sup> Women of all ages, income, race, ethnicity, culture, and education can be affected. Sometimes the mothers have easier pregnancies and sometimes they have difficult pregnancies. Some of them have other children, and for some this is their first child.<sup>32</sup>
2. In rare occasions, postpartum psychosis can occur where the situation gets more serious where psychotic symptoms are present such as delusions or hallucinations.<sup>33</sup>
3. A mother – regardless of her faith – can be diagnosed with postpartum depression after having at least four of the symptoms on the list above for more than a week. If the symptoms last for a week or less, then it is called “the baby blues.”<sup>34</sup>
4. The list of symptoms for postpartum depression includes the following:
  - a) “A loss of pleasure or interest in things you used to enjoy, including sex
  - b) Eating much more, or much less, than you usually do
  - c) Anxiety—all or most of the time—or panic attacks
  - d) Racing, scary thoughts
  - e) Feeling guilty or worthless - blaming yourself

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<sup>31</sup> American Psychological Association.” What is postpartum depression & anxiety? Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/resources/reports/postpartum-depression> bid.

<sup>32</sup> American Psychological Association.” What is postpartum depression & anxiety? Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/resources/reports/postpartum-depression> bid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall Asher and Mary Asher, *The Christian’s Guide to Psychological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bemidji, Minn.: Focus Pub., 2014, 2004), 134.

- f) Excessive irritability, anger or agitation—mood swings
- g) Crying uncontrollably for very long periods of time
- h) Fear of not being a good mother
- i) Fear of being left alone with the baby
- j) Misery
- k) Inability to sleep, sleeping too much, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- l) Disinterest in the baby, family, and friends
- m) Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, or making decisions
- n) Thoughts of hurting yourself or the baby”<sup>35</sup>

#### B. A Secular Diagnosis

1. The diagnosis for postpartum depression cannot be concluded by a blood test, or an MRI like high blood pressure and cancer. The secular professionals can only diagnose postpartum depression by the way a patient feels, thinks, and acts.
2. Postpartum depression is one of the many different types of depression found in the DSM alongside the following:
  - a) major depressive disorder
  - b) bipolar depression
  - c) perinatal and postpartum depression
  - d) persistent depressive disorder
  - e) premenstrual dysphoric disorder
  - f) psychotic depression

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<sup>35</sup> “American Psychological Association.” What is postpartum depression & anxiety? Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/resources/reports/postpartum-depression>

- g) seasonal affective disorder<sup>36</sup>
- 3. Depression is how people feel and how their feelings affect their ability to live their daily lives. However, the secular world calls this a “medical condition.”<sup>37</sup>
- 4. The American Psychological Association requires only 4 of the symptoms to be present for longer than 2 weeks to diagnose a person with postpartum depression.<sup>38</sup>
- 5. In addition, the APA presents postpartum depression as a “real, but treatable, psychological disorder” and the person has not fault to it.<sup>39</sup>

### C. A Secular Solution

- 1. The following is the list of treatments for postpartum depression:
  - a) “interpersonal psychotherapy
  - b) cognitive behavioral therapy
  - c) bright light therapy
  - d) electroconvulsive therapy
  - e) medications such as brexanolone, its generic name, which is the first drug approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Cleveland Clinic.” Depression. Accessed April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022.  
<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9290-depression>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “American Psychological Association.” What is postpartum depression & anxiety? Accessed April 2, 2022. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/resources/reports/postpartum-depression>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “PsychCentral.” All about postpartum Depression. Accessed April 2, 2022.  
<https://psychcentral.com/depression/postpartum-depression#symptoms>.

- i. According to clinical studies, the drug Zulresso (brexanolone) has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms within two to three days, with most women feeling better after thirty days.<sup>41</sup>
- ii. This medication can be administered intravenously (IV) over a period of sixty hours at a specially certified healthcare facility and under the care of the health care provider.<sup>42</sup> This medication does not provide a cure for postpartum depression, but it can relieve symptoms.<sup>43</sup>
- iii. Research shows that after treatment women were scoring 2.5 points lower in moderate PPD and 3.7-5.5 points lower for severe PPD when compared with the placebo results.<sup>44</sup> The results were based on a depression severity scale, moderate PPD up to 26 and severe PPD 26-52.<sup>45</sup> The cost is \$34,000 for 4.5 vials (depends on the insurance plans).<sup>46</sup>
- iv. Side effects are: very sleepy, may pass out during the infusion, increased risk of suicidal thoughts or actions after the infusion.<sup>47</sup> Couple things to

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<sup>41</sup> “Zulresson (brexanolone) injection.” Zylresso may help. Accessed April 23 2022.  
<https://www.zulresso.com/about-zulresso>

<sup>42</sup> “Medical News today.” Zulresson (brexanolone). Accessed April 23 2022.  
[https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325691#\\_noHeaderPrefixedContent](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325691#_noHeaderPrefixedContent)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Zulresson (brexanolone) injection.” Zylresso may help. Accessed April 23 2022.  
<https://www.zulresso.com/about-zulresso>

consider: Zulresso passes into breast milk, and it is unknown (in case of pregnancy) if it will harm the unborn baby.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. A Biblical Perspective of Depression

In order to understand postpartum depression, it is important to have an appropriate view of man. Understanding that man is an embodied soul created by God allows us to evaluate the symptoms and causes of postpartum depression from a biblical worldview. When we have a biblical understanding of man, we can better examine the heart issues of a Christian mother who struggles with postpartum depression.

##### A. A Biblical View of Man

1. God created human beings in two parts: one the body – dust from the ground and second, the soul– which God created by breathing into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). God created the physical aspect (outer man) and the spiritual aspect (inner man) to be unique and only given to humans.<sup>49</sup>

- a) The disciple Paul describes this in more detail when he writes to the believers in Corinth to not be discouraged as the outer self is washing away because the inner self is being renewed daily (2 Cor. 4:16). This verse should be encouraging for the Christian mother as her body is still recovering from giving birth. However, because her inner man is being renewed daily by the power of the Word of God, she is never alone, as the Holy Spirit lives in her. She is not to make her decisions based on her discouragements and current situation. Her decisions should be

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<sup>48</sup> “Zulresson (brexanolone) injection.” Zylresso may help. Accessed April 23 2022. <https://www.zulresso.com/about-zulresso>

<sup>49</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 191.

based on who she is in Christ and His Word which states that she is chosen, holy, and beloved (Col. 3:12).

2. The inner man and outer man, also called the “dichotomist nature of mankind”<sup>50</sup> work together and they influence one another. The inner man includes the words heart, mind, soul, conscience, and inner self.<sup>51</sup> The outer man includes brain, muscles, organs, bones, and nerve cells.<sup>52</sup> There are two ways the communication between the inner man and outer man happens.<sup>53</sup>

- a) Humans were designed by God to be guided by their souls. The inner man is where the moral decisions take place, and the outer body follows. The body is acting as the mediator of what is going on in the heart. Also, the body informs the soul for physical needs such as sleep, food, water, and air to breath.<sup>54</sup>

- i. One example of this relationship between the inner and outer man is when the disciples were hungry while they were walking in the grainfields. The sensation of hunger in their bodies instructed their souls and they ate (Matt. 12:1).

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<sup>50</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 197.

<sup>51</sup> Edward, Welch. *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998), 35.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>53</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016) 197.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 197-198.

- b) The second interaction between the inner man with the outer man is when the relationship between the two is sinful as the soul fails the body and the body fails the soul.<sup>55</sup>
- i. In the garden, Adam and Eve failed their bodies as they followed their desire. Instead of following the moral teachings, they choose to disobey and sin against God and against each other.<sup>56</sup>
3. Christian mothers who struggle with postpartum depression live in a sinful world where their souls and bodies are not doing what God has designed them to do. There is a battle between the Spirit which leads to life and the body which leads to death as a result of the fallen world.<sup>57</sup>
4. The implication for Christian mothers who are struggling with postpartum depression is that during this time they are both suffering and sinning as they are working on figuring out the new normal in their lives. Mothers are not doing this alone as Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit, the Helper who is sent by the Father "... will teach all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:26).
- a) Christian mothers after giving birth are faced with overloading messages between the inner man and outer man as so many changes are taking place at once alongside many new routines. Some of the new changes are: milk production if breastfeeding, up at all hours of the night and dealing with postpartum pain from the delivery.

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<sup>55</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016) 199.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

- b) As the outer man is dealing with all those changes, none of these problems are unique.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the situation is not to be used as an excuse to respond in a sinful way believing the uniqueness of the situation.<sup>59</sup> With His strength, they can do all things as God is always faithful (Phil. 4:13).
- c) At the same time, the inner man is struggling with thoughts such as: worrying if she is capable of doing a good job with her child, accepting her postpartum body and the changes that come with it, lamenting of her freedom she used to have before the baby, and comparing herself with other mothers. The Word of God has a lot to teach about worry, anxiety, discontentment. We are to rejoice in the Lord, always and to know that He is close to us, and not to be anxious but having thankful hearts (Phil. 4:4-7).

## B. The Heart of Man

1. The Word of God is warning us “keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). After having a baby, a lot of things are changing for the Christian mother. Lack of sleep, decrease in finances, anxiety and worry about taking care of the baby come to surface. These new pressures added to her life can reveal sinful behaviors. At the same time, those same areas can be used by God to help her grow and be more like Christ (James 1:2-4).
2. The following questions need to be addressed during the pain and suffering, how do Christian mothers trust God? Do they have that kind of relationship and confidence in

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<sup>58</sup> Jay, Adams. *Christ and Your Problems*. (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1971), 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 1

Him that He will help them through this?<sup>60</sup> Do they believe that God is “completely sovereign, infinite in wisdom and perfect in love?”<sup>61</sup> Do they trust Him when they do not understand their trial by following Jesus’ example as He said “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will.” (Matt. 26:39).

3. During this time of struggle and trials what do Christian mothers worship? “We are all worshipers by nature.”<sup>62</sup> Is this new baby, expectations, fear of failure, worrying or maybe pride to ask for help become something more valuable than your love and obedience to God?<sup>63</sup>

#### V. Biblical Perspective on Postpartum Depression

The more we can understand what a counselee is experiencing, the better we can help them through biblical principles. In order to best serve the one suffering with postpartum depression we need to understand what is going on with both the outer and inner man. Our responses are to be in a manner that is pleasing to God.

##### A. The Fall: Study God’s Words to Adam and Eve

1. God created mankind in the image of God as He said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). The rest of creation was made according to their kind (Gen. 1:24-25). There are three ways for mankind to show how they manifest the image of God in the world.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jerry, Bridges. *Trusting God*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2008) 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>62</sup> Brad, Bigney. *Gospel Treason: Betraying the Gospel with Hidden Idols*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2012), 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>64</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 184.

- a) “who we are” - human beings are the only part of the creation who have abilities in complex reasoning, have cognitive abilities, and are moral creatures.<sup>65</sup>
  - b) “the relationships we have” - humans are created in the image of God as they are created to know, love and have relationships with other people which is how “...God enjoys perfect relationship within the Trinity.”<sup>66</sup>
  - c) “what we do”- humans were given dominion over creation (Gen. 1:26).
2. God blessed them and gave specific instructions to Adam and Eve: to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). He also commanded them of what not to eat from the tree of knowledge (Gen. 1:17).
  3. In Genesis 3, Eve and Adam were tempted by Satan, and they doubted, disbelieved and they distrusted who God is and what He had told them to do (Gen. 3:1-7). After eating the forbidden fruit, sin became part of Adam and of his moral nature; consequently, sin has been passed to all his descendants “... and the process of physical death began.”<sup>67</sup> Sin has impacted every area of man’s life, and this includes relationships with others and with God.
  4. After their sin God said to the woman “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16). John MacArthur points out that “...woman gave birth to sin in the human race and genetically passes it to all her children.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 184-185.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>67</sup> John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 450.

<sup>68</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 18

5. God promised a Savior and for many years people were waiting for Jesus, the last Adam to restore and fulfill God's plan.<sup>69</sup> Jesus Christ is the only hope to restore humanity and the image of God in the fallen world.<sup>70</sup>
6. Since the fall the image of God has not been reflected in humanity the way He had created it to be. This is exemplified in the failure to think and act in a way that glorifies God and not self.<sup>71</sup> As biblical counselors we are to use the teachings from the Word of God in order to correctly represent God.<sup>72</sup>

#### B. Getting to the Root of Responses

1. To understand where each Christian mother is, biblical counselors need to do a good job collecting data and gaining an understanding of where each mother is coming from before giving their opinion (Prov.18:13).
  - a. One of the first things the biblical counselor should do is to look for and to listen to halo data by observing the mother's body language, by paying attention to her facial expressions, and by listening to the tone of her voice.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the biblical counselor is to enter her world by showing Christ's love for her and a willingness to walk with her during this time in her life.<sup>74</sup> The biblical counselor

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<sup>69</sup> John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 450.

<sup>70</sup> Heath, Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016) 189.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 189

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 190.

<sup>73</sup> Jay, Adams. *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 258.

<sup>74</sup> Paul, Tripp. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 126.

is to listen to her feelings, repeated words, self-talk and to find out what she believes about God and who He is during this time.<sup>75</sup> Then the biblical counselor is to ask good questions to get to the heart of the problem in order to help the Christian mother.<sup>76</sup> The questions could be divided into three categories and can be asked at the same time, not necessarily one category at time.

- i. Ask questions about her feelings and emotions and when the specific symptom started. For example, if she is feeling anxious, was it right after having the baby or was she anxious before? How is her relationship with her husband since the birth of the baby? Is he able to help her or does he have the same expectations before the arrival of the baby? Does she have family members, church family and other friends close by to help her and support her? If yes, in which way? How are the older children behaving towards the new baby? Are they able to help or are not understanding the new changes? If she is having anxiety or strong emotions, does it seem to happen before or after specific events during the day? If yes, how? In which ways has the delivery of the baby met her expectations? If not, what is happening that she did not anticipate? What is she feeling during the day? Which words is she repeating to herself and what gospel is she listening to? Is she listening to the Gospel of the Bible or is she putting her hope and answers in the worldly gospel?

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<sup>75</sup> Paul, Tripp. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 128.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 259

- ii. Second, the biblical counselor needs to ask questions regarding the physical issues the mother has been dealing with. Questions such as: how was the delivery process, how has recovery been, how are you doing with your milk supply, does the baby sleep and eat well, any health issues for the baby that she needs to follow up with. In addition, questions about her own body such as: have you seen your doctor regarding the physical issues? What have you done about feelings of exhaustion? Have you done a blood test to check vitamin D, vitamin B12, iron and thyroid levels? Are you able to return to your previous physical activities? Lastly, if she was working before the delivery of the baby is she going back to work? What about the care of the baby? If not, how is it going to affect their finances? If yes, what are her thoughts about it.
- iii. The third category includes questions about where the Christian mother is spiritually. Has she been able to pray? How often does she read her bible? If the answer is no, then what is holding her back? What is she listening to during the day? The daily news, Netflix, checking out social media or worship music? Is she back to church? If not, what is keeping her from not attending? Is she back to life group or women's bible study? If not, how long before she goes back and what has been keeping her from going? Has she taken refuge in God during this time or is she running away from Him?<sup>77</sup> Does she doubt Him by believing He gave her more than she can

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<sup>77</sup> David, Powlison. *Seeing With New Eyes. Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003.

handle? In which ways does she trust Him, and she can see Him working in her life during this time? Does she have a biblical understanding of motherhood?

### C. Hope through the Gospel

1. A Christian mother can find hope through the Gospel and what Christ has done on the Cross. She is to keep her eyes and her thoughts on the blessings that are above and not on the earthy things which surround her (Col. 3:1-2). Some helpful verses and applications are the following:
  - a. Help her to see that her hope is not based on her feelings but instead on what she knows about Christ (Rom. 5:2-3).<sup>78</sup>
  - b. Hope is a choice, and she can choose to either have hope or not to have hope.<sup>79</sup> She is to "...set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.1:13). With the help of the Holy Spirit, she is to obey God's commands and not her feelings.
  - c. Hope is believing her needs will be met by God (Rom. 15:13).
  - d. Hope comes from God and not based on her own strength and abilities (2 Chr. 32:7-8).
  - e. Hope comes from God who is the only true source of hope (Ps. 71:5-6).
  - f. Hope comes knowing God is always with her and He is faithful (Hag. 2:4-5).
  - g. Hope is a result of walking close with God (John 15:4-5).

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<sup>78</sup> John, MacArthur and the Master's College Faculty. *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 121.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

- h. Having hope helps with having joy during times of trial and testing and this includes postpartum depression.<sup>80</sup>

## VI. A Plan for Counseling

This section will act as a walk-through systematic guide for the counselor, or lay person, who is counseling a Christian mother who is struggling with postpartum depression. The plan includes specific topics to discuss with the counselee and also daily homework assignments.

### A. Counseling

1. One of the first things to talk about in the counseling office is that change is not going to happen overnight and that the Christian mother and the counselor will be spending at least a few months together.
2. The counselor must use discernment in order to know if the counselee has a personal relationship with Christ.
  - a. If the counselor concludes that there is no personal relationship with Christ, then the counseling session will then focus on teaching the Gospel. This will include sharing in greater detail who God is and what the Gospel message entails. It would be an opportunity to share real hope and how transformative change of the heart is impossible without Jesus. Instead, she will learn a few new skills without lasting effects and with no eternal hope. The unbeliever mother will mostly likely take the Word of God as suggestions. For the Christian mother however, the Word of God has the final authority.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Patricia, Miller. *The Quick-Scripture Reference for Counseling Women*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 152-153.

<sup>81</sup> John and Janie Street, *The Biblical Counseling Guide for Women* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2016), 14.

- b. It is critical for the counselor to know the counselee is a believer. It will be helpful to have her fill out the *Spiritual Convictions* homework sheet which asks the counselee to finish sentences with two or three answers each.<sup>82</sup> There eighteen questions in total and some of them are:
- i. God is:
  - ii. Jesus Christ is:
  - iii. A Christian is:
  - iv. I know that I am (or am not) a Christian because:
  - v. Sin is:
3. The goal of counseling is not to fix everything the Christian mother is dealing with, but instead it is to help her to see her every situation through the lens of the Bible and to learn to live a life of faithful obedience to God and His Word. She is to have faith that she is transformed daily to be more like Christ (John 6:35-40).<sup>83</sup>
4. Even after concluding the Christian mother is a believer, it is important to go over the Gospel and gain a better understanding of the counselee's theology.
- a. Starting at the book of Genesis is significant for a few reasons:
    - i. In Genesis 1, we find God's creation of man and woman and what His original plans were for them (Gen. 1:27-28). Verse 2:24 is important because God explains how man and woman are to be one flesh.

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<sup>82</sup> Wayne, A. Mack. *Preparing for Marriage God's Way*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 96-105.

<sup>83</sup> John and Janie Street, *The Biblical Counseling Guide for Women* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2016), 14.

- ii. In Genesis 3, we learn what happened as a result of Adam and Eve's sin and its implications for the rest of humanity and the world both physically and spiritually (3:1-15).
  - iii. God states the following to Eve, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). This verse should bring both clarity and encouragement to the Christian mother. All that she is going through right now is not a surprise to God nor is it an accident or her fault. What she is going through right now is part of the consequence of the sin we all have in us.
  - iv. In addition, in the book of Genesis (3:15) and other books we can see God's promises and His redemptive plan (Eph. 1:3-6; Rom.5:19; Luk.1:30-32; Rom. 5:19).
- b. Another area to explore is the definition of who God is. The counselor needs to make sure that the Christian mother and the counselor are talking about the God of the Bible and not any other god (1 John 1:15; 2 Sam. 22:32-34; Psa. 54:4)
  - c. A biblical definition of sin, which is missing the mark in following God's Word, needs to be explained clearly to the Christian mother so that she can see how she is sinning in her own life during this time of suffering and trial (Rom. 5:19; Psa. 51:5; Eph. 2:3). The penalty of her sin is death, but Christ is saving her from hell (Rev. 20:15; Math. 13:42; 2 Thess. 1:8).
  - d. In the end, God reveals His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness by sending His only Son to reconcile humanity with Him. Christ, who lived a sinless life, died on

the cross and He was risen three days later (2 Cor. 5:21). He died so the people who believe in Him can be forgiven (Mar. 2:17; Luk.5:32; 1 Tim. 1:15).

#### B. The Truth of Scripture and Reality

1. Postpartum depression is diagnosed based on how mothers feel and think. As a result, their feelings, emotions, and critical thoughts are controlling and shifting their decision making and how they interpret life. However, the Christian mother has a choice not to obey them and follow them because she is to live according to God's Word and commands.<sup>84</sup>
2. The counselor needs to help the Christian mother who is struggling with postpartum depression to separate her spiritual struggles first and replace any lies she has been telling herself such as "I just can't make myself do anything" with the truth of God.<sup>85</sup> She needs to recognize what exactly it is that she is worshipping more than God, repent, and then replace unbiblical thinking with biblical thinking.<sup>86</sup> She is to set her mind on God's Word:
  - a. Biblical thinking leads to right thinking (Phi. 4:5-8).
  - b. God knows, understands and He answers during trials (Ps.9:12; Job 23:10; Ps. 38:9).
  - c. God will help her to go on and He does not forget her (Isa. 44:21; Ps. 37:23-24; 2 Cor. 4:16)

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<sup>84</sup> Marshall Asher and Mary Asher, *The Christian's Guide to Psychological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bemidji, Minn.: Focus Pub., 2014, 2004), 134

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 152-153.

3. The counselor is to bring the Word of God as the final authority
  - a. His Word stands forever (Isai. 40:8)
  - b. His Word is breathed out by God for our teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training (2 Tim. 3:16).
  - c. God's Word and laws are perfect (Ps. 19:7-11)
  - d. His Word is living and active (Heb. 4:12).

### C. Addressing Heart Issues

1. After reviewing the Gospel and addressing any areas of theological confusion or misunderstanding, the counselor can start addressing the heart idols that have been exposed after the birth of the child. Most likely the counselor will need a few sessions to cover all the topics from the list above. In addition, it depends where each Christian mother is with her theology.
2. The first homework assignment will include the following and it will be very helpful to uncover the Christian mother's heart issues.
  - a. Prayer time (specific time).
  - b. Bible reading: starting either with the Book of Ephesians or Colossians as both books describe what Christ has done for her first and then, what she is to do as a result.
  - c. Verse memorization.
  - d. *Christ and Your Problems* by Jay Adams. The small booklet will help her understand that she is not the only one who is struggling with postpartum depression, and that God is faithful (1 Cor. 10:13).

- e. Fill out the *Spiritual Convictions Questionnaire* by Wayne Mack which will show which theological areas need to be corrected.
  - f. Keep a journal daily and write at least about one event by answering the following questions:<sup>87</sup>
    - i. What was going on? What was the situation?
    - ii. What were you thinking and feeling as it was going on? Examine your heart for this.
    - iii. What did you do in response? The behavior was not forced on you; instead you chose it
    - iv. Why did you do it? What were you seeking to accomplish?
    - v. What was the result?
3. Each Christian mother will be in a different place based on their heart idols, physical symptoms, and theology. The counselor will have to be flexible and able to adopt and help each person based on their needs (1 Thes. 5:14). The most common sinful areas are the following:
- a. Fear. Some of the most common fears are: not being able to take care of the baby; what if something goes wrong, what if the baby gets sick, what about SIDS, how about the baby's development, what about Covid?
    - i. The solution to that is trusting God both with her life and also with the baby's life.
      - 1. Do not let your heart be troubled (John 14:1)

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<sup>87</sup> Paul, Tripp. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 224-226.

2. Have confidence in His love by trusting Him (Ps. 112:7)
  3. Trust in Him and not in humans (Jer. 17:5, 7-8)
- b. Pride. Some of the ways pride's manifestations are: perfectionism, a lack of gratitude, wanting control, being consumed with what others think.<sup>88</sup>
- i. The solution is to learn humility and learn to focus on God and not on others and the situation she is in.
    1. she is to ask for advice and help (Prov. 13:10).
    2. focus on Christ (Phil. 1:21).
    3. abide in Him (John 15:5)
- c. Idolatry. The new baby has become the center of her world
- i. The solution is to have a Christ-centred home and not a child centred home
    1. Have no other gods than God (Exo. 20:3-6)
    2. keep yourself from idols (1 John 5:21)
    3. the child has become a stumbling block (Eze. 14:1-14)
4. During the counseling process, the counselor will be able to recognize other sin areas in the life of the counselee and switch the agenda accordingly.

## VII. Conclusion

A. There are a few challenging reasons about postpartum depression that makes it hard to define and actually have one definition for all.

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<sup>88</sup> Stuart, Scott. *From Pride to Humility: A Biblical Perspective*. (Bemidji, MN: Focus Pub., 2002), 7-10.

1. There are some people in the church today, biblical counselors included, that act as if this issue does not exist. The truth is that “these are real symptoms, real factors, real issues that women struggle with after having a child.”<sup>89</sup>
2. For some new mothers it is easy to adopt to their new role; however, this is not always the case for all of them.
3. The factors that cause some mothers to struggle with postpartum depression are:<sup>90</sup>
  - a. fear of taking care of, feed of, and nurturing their child
  - b. sleep deprivation
  - c. bodily changes after labor
  - d. expectations to go on in life like everything is normal
  - e. expectations of what kind of mother she is
  - f. great responsibility that God trusted her with this child
4. Most Christian mothers who give birth have no postpartum depression and actually have great experiences with each one of the children while anticipating their next child.
5. Even among Christian mothers, there is a range of emotions, physical needs, and training of how to take care of their baby and lack of theology.

B. The topic of postpartum depression is complex. The answer to the problem is twofold.

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<sup>89</sup> Johnson, Dale. “Postpartum Depression”, May 29, 2018, in Truth in Love, produced by Sean Perron, podcast, 11:16, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/til-156-postpartum-depression/>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

1. First, the Word of God has answers regarding dealing with this topic. In the Bible we can't find the exact words "postpartum depression." But we can find the words, shame, guilt, despair, downcast, and not having any joy which are what a Christian mother struggles with. Psalm 42 and 6 will be encouragement for the counselee as she will find comfort knowing she is not alone.<sup>91</sup>
  - a. Biblical counselors need to not minimize any of the situations, and they are to comfort each counselee based on where they are in this delicate and complicated situation. The way the counselee feels is not abnormal and the counselor is to help her in specific ways to deal with some of the issues. At the same time, as she is getting some rest and setting the right expectations, the counselor is to share about the hope she can find in the Word of God and teach her how God is using this suffering and trial to sanctify her and help her grow to be more like Christ.<sup>92</sup>
2. The second part is to give the counselee permission to recover physically after being pregnant for nine months and after the labor.<sup>93</sup>
  - a. In addition, the counselee's husband, family, extended family and church family should come along the counselee and help her and her family with whatever needs she might have. Every case will be different, but some practical examples are:

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<sup>91</sup> Johson, Dale. "Postpartum Depression", May 29, 2018, in Truth in Love, produced by Sean Perron, podcast, 11:16, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/til-156-postpartum-depression/>

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

- i. helping with cooking
  - ii. helping with the older kids
  - iii. cleaning the house
  - iv. running errands
  - v. staying with the baby so the mother can sleep
3. The Word of God teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun and postpartum depression is nothing new and the church can help with it. (Ecc. 1:9).  
As biblical counselors and as a body of Christ, we are to help the Christian mothers who are struggling with postpartum depression and not to dismiss what they are going through. Coming alongside Christian mothers is a way believers can be faithful and obedient in serving God by being His hands and feet to those in time of need. The goal is to help them see their situation through the lens of the Bible and to remind her that their hope, help, and answers come from Christ.

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