



The Christian Index

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‘Let’s talk’: Georgia pastor shares his own story of depression

This originally appeared at Wilkes’ personal blog on Friday, Sept. 13.

It happened again this week. Another pastor committed suicide.

When I read the news Tuesday evening that Jarrid Wilson, a pastor out of Harvest Christian Fellowship, had taken his own life it really hit close to my heart. First, my heart went out to his wife Juli and their kids, I could only imagine what they were feeling. Then, I begin to think of him being a pastor and how hard it had to be for him to face his own personal struggles while still trying to speak hope and victory that is found in Jesus to others but unable at times to find that same victory for himself.

Jarrid was not just a pastor; he was a husband and father open about his own struggles with depression. So much so, he and his wife had started a ministry aimed at helping people with depression, especially within the church called Anthem of Hope. If you are like me you ask, “How did this happen again and why did this happen to someone who loved Jesus, loved his family, and had a

heart for helping others?”

My daughter, Mikalyn, came into the living room where I was sitting after she and I had gone to a softball game to watch some of our youth and one of our cousins play at White County. She sat down and said, “Dad, did you read about the pastor that committed suicide?”

This opened a door for us to talk about how this could have happened and the power of depression, especially as it relates to pastors.

Can we talk?

We all need to talk more about the reality of depression and how a person can be saved, love Jesus, believe the Bible, pray, and seek the face of God and still battle with depression and also have thoughts of suicide. But that is just it, we don’t talk about it.

I got very honest and real with her about my own struggles ...

I know, I don’t like talking about it openly either. Not even to those who are close to me. But that all changed Sept. 10. The more we talked; I just began to share with her my personal journey.



I got very honest and real with her about my own struggles, the journey God had taken me through over the last couple of years, what I had learned, and what I was learning. It was good for us to talk. The more I have thought about what we talked about, I begin to feel God wanted me to do the same thing in the context of writing a post and sharing my journey in hopes of it helping someone else.

So, depression, can we talk?

Not a mountain lion, an anaconda

I thought I knew enough about depression as a pastor seeking to minister to those who had walked through it. I thought I understood their battle. But honestly, I did not have a clue, and to everyone who might read this – unless you have gone through the dark valley personally – you will never fully know what that person is feeling.

It is not just something you can shake off, pray off, or even just “think positive” faith-filled thoughts and make yourself better. It is so much more than that. I have learned that

personally. There is the feeling of hopelessness, weariness, and isolation. Fear and worry become close companions.

About two years ago something inside of me shifted. I had always battled with having some bad days mixed in with good days, but it seemed my bad days started adding up more than my good ones. Depression isn’t something that jumps on you like a mountain lion in the woods; it is more like an anaconda that slowly chokes the life out of you.

Yes, life was hectic at that moment and we had our plates full, but so does everybody. We had faced seasons like this before. But something was different this time. I wasn’t bouncing back like I normally would. It was more than a Blue Monday, the doubts, fears, and negativity lingered. It was during this season that I had my first full-blown panic attack.

That is harder to write than I thought it would be.

Again, admitting this in a public way is not easy. It admits weakness on my part, but I am convinced that the path to strength is admitting weakness.

'He is not.'

I really thought I had all of this hid pretty good, even from my wife, Courtney. I should have known better! She knew I had been struggling, even though I still didn't want to admit that. Courtney knew really before I was willing to be honest about my battle.

On one occasion she went with me to a doctor's visit, it was just a regular checkup. I know I am a big guy, but believe it or not, I am relative healthy for my size.

In addition to my physical examination, that day he asked a question about my mental health and the health of my inner heart.

My doctor is a Christian and we talk about the Lord and he has been a great encourager. He also knows I am a pastor. So, he said, "Michael, how are you handling the pressure these days?"

I was just about to say, "Just fine, Doc" like I always did. Before I could, though, Courtney spoke up and said, "He is not."

Plain and simple.

Thus, began the conversation with my doctor about the possibility of my depression and the need for some medicine. I told him if he would like to give me the prescription fine, that would be good. Only thing was, I never filled it and never took them, and I never planned to.

I kept the prescription hidden on the side of the refrigerator, almost ashamed that it had even been talked about. To me it was a symbol of my failures to get victory over this battle.

After all, I was a child of God, I was a pastor. Ed Stetzer, in his article about Jarrid, put

it best: "Pastors are supposed to provide help, not need help. Pastors are supposed to speak of life, not despair. But that's not reality."

It was certainly not my reality. It was an inward struggle that I just thought I could handle between me and the Lord. I was a pastor. I was supposed to be the guy that others come to

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with their struggles and point them to Jesus. But even pastors struggle.

Please hear my heart on this subject. Yes, being a pastor is a calling from God and a high calling at that. But God does not call "perfect" men to pastor, because there are none.

As a matter of fact, Paul himself said in 2 Cor. 4:7 that God says we have this ministry from the Lord and that – "Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us." In other words, we are just cracked pots! It is not us, but Christ in us.

Turning point

Somehow, we as pastors and others have begun to believe this is not true. As a matter of fact, the headlines for Jarrid Wilson didn't start off "Jarrid Wilson, father of two and husband of Juli, commits suicide." It was "Jarrid Wilson, mega church pastor." In other words, wow, he was a pastor.

Yes, he was a pastor, but he was still human and as such, still hurt just like any other human and any other Christian! And yes, even pastors can struggle with depression like anybody else and, yes, even

have thoughts of ending it all.

For me, it was a day that I felt all of this come crashing in on me. I will forever remember that day and where I was and what went through my mind. Thoughts I never dreamed I would have. Thoughts that scared me. Thinking – my family and church would be better off if I was not there to just take up space.

I would soon learn this is just a lie from the devil himself. But I want you to know, for the first time I also learned how easy it is for someone battling depression to have a thought he never expected to enter his mind.

It was a turning point for me. I knew I needed help and needed to talk to someone. This is not easy to talk about, but I am not doing so to look for sympathy. I feel I am supposed to share this in hopes that others will talk to someone.

A few nights after that day, I looked at Courtney and asked, "Can we talk?"

Start of a journey

I got very honest with her, shared about my panic attacks, shared about the thoughts I had been wrestling with. My sweet wife showed grace beyond belief and has been there for me in this journey.

After that night, I begin a journey to finding healing and asked God to lead me as I walked. I started with getting my medicine filled. I can still remember how ashamed I felt the day I went to the pharmacy. I can remember thinking, "They know I am a pastor and surely, they will look at me and think, 'Wow, a pastor needs this, come on pastor, surely

Jesus will give you victory."

Yes, He will. But I begin to realize that He also works through doctors and medicine.

The truth is, the medicine helped. It is a low dose, but it helps. That is not easy to write either, because some people close to me don't even know what I just shared. But I feel it so important to get this message out, even for other pastors.

You need to know that it is okay. Think with me: Why is there a stigma in our local churches if someone takes a medicine that helps with his depression and he also sees a counselor or doctor, but we rejoice when someone sees a cardiologist and takes their blood pressure medicine to prevent heart attacks and strokes?

We must see that God does bring healing and yes, He is the great physician. But He also works thru medicine and even doctors. Do I believe medicines can get abused and are not always the need for every person, yes? But let's not throw out the

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baby with bathwater. We must believe the Creator of the Universe gave doctors wisdom and knowledge and there are helps that we should not ignore.

We must also see that mental health is just as important as physical health and healing. We fill our prayer requests and want people to share about all of the sickness out there. But there is a fear when someone

says, “Pray for me; I am walking thru depression” or “Pray for my family member; they are walking through depression”?

When someone shares about getting healthy physically, we clap, congratulate them, encourage them, and even rejoice. But if someone says they’re trying to get healthy in their soul and mind and need to see somebody or take medicine, we all wonder, “Wow, can you believe they said that?”

Bringing others in

God help us to see this need. There are so many people who are hurting and hiding and even some, like Jarrid, who are honest about his depression but still struggle to get victory.

By all accounts, no one would have known that he would take his own life. He had done a funeral that day. He had posted things reminding others to seek hope and find hope in Jesus and even gone to his son’s t-ball practice. Just like those who may be reading this, you may think there is no way out. But there is.

We must talk about it. That was one of the next things I began to do. I shared with others as I could and as I was able. I talked to my chairman of deacons and let him know what I was walking through. I had dear friends close to me in whom I could confide. This is so vital. Paul says so in 2 Cor. 7:5-6, “For even when we arrived in Macedonia our bodies had no rest, but we were oppressed at every turn—conflicts and disputes without, fears and dread within. But God, who comforts and encourages the depressed and the disquieted, comforted us by the arrival of Titus.

Did you catch that? First Paul gets honest and says we had conflicts without and fears and dreads within, that God comforted them and encour-

aged the depressed and the disquieted by the arrival of Titus. In other words, one of the

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ways God brings healing to the hurting is the encouragement of other brothers and sisters in Christ who refresh us.

I have come to see my journey as a blessing. Over the last two years, I have had the opportunity to listen to others who are struggling and then be able to say to them – I know exactly what you are feeling, and here is why. They are blown away at first, but then God uses my story to let them know they are not alone.

Leaning into Jesus

God can bring healing and work in your life. You do not have to be afraid; you do not have to feel guilty; and you are not a failure as a Christian because you are battling depression. I thank God He has placed others in my life to encourage me and I pray I have been able to help others.

Over the course of the two years, I have begun to find healing. The last year has been one of the toughest I have faced as a pastor and there

were some struggles. But by God’s grace none like the day two years ago.

It has been a journey and one I still face every day. I seek to lean into Jesus and learn more about what can trigger my bad days, what fills my tank, and what drains me.

Now, instead of seeking

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balance, I am seeking to find the rhythms that Jesus talked about. This includes days and seasons I am all in and those when I need to pull back and rest. I have found that the weaker I become, the stronger Jesus becomes in my life!

Paul said it best when he had prayed three times for God

to remove the thorn in the flesh: 2 Cor. 12:8-10– “Three different times I begged the

Lord to take it away. Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses,

and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

We need to talk to Jesus and get honest with how we are feeling. Yes, stay in our Bible and prayer, even when we feel empty. But, also, if you find that your Blue Mondays have turned into Blue weeks and months, don’t be afraid to talk to your medical doctor. Don’t be afraid to talk to your family and don’t be afraid to talk to other brothers and sisters in Christ who can pray for you and encourage you.

What we bring out in the light, God can shine His Glory on. Don’t let Satan keep this in the dark where there is no healing and no hope. Let’s talk.

Need someone to talk to?

Georgia Baptist Church Minister Relations provides free, confidential counseling to pastors, church staff members, and their families.

Call (770) 936-5362.