



MARY SOUTHERLAND

The *Stress-Buster* and Women's Ministry Motivator



Coming Out of the Dark

Part 1

Mary Southerland

Florida is famous for its sinkholes. I personally find them fascinating since I grew up in Texas where most holes are made *intentionally*. As I studied these overnight wonders, an interesting explanation emerged. Scientists assert that sinkholes occur when the underground resources gradually dry up, causing the surface soil to lose its underlying support. Everything simply caves in forming an ugly pit.

Depression and sinkholes have a lot in common. Depression seems to overwhelm with a vicious suddenness when it is actually the result of a malignant and constant process. Inner resources are slowly depleted until one day there is nothing left. The world caves in and darkness reigns.

Depression is America's number one health problem. Someone once called it "a dark tunnel without a ray of light" while cartoonists portray it as "little black cloud hovering overhead." I have a friend who says, "Some days you're the bug. Some days you're the windshield." Many believe that depression is simply a spiritual problem while others insist it is an emotional and physical disorder. They are all right. Studies indicate that over half of all women and one out of three men struggle with depression on a regular basis. Because no one is immune to the darkness, we must learn to face it honestly, with emotional integrity.

That moment came for me in the spring of 1995 when I realized that something was drastically wrong. I was empty and completely exhausted. It seemed as if I had been living in the fast and furious lane forever! Overwhelmed, I sat down and mentally listed the demands on my life:

- Serving as Pastor's wife in a large and fast-growing church
- Raising two young children
- Maintaining a hectic speaking schedule
- Directing the Women's Ministry of our church
- Teaching a weekly and monthly Bible study
- Counseling women in crisis
- Playing the piano for three worship services
- Teaching twenty piano and voice students

No wonder I was struggling. I was just plain tired. Being a perfectionist, I had always been very strong, driven to excel with little sympathy for weak people. Now I, the strong one, couldn't get out of bed. Getting dressed by the time my children returned from school meant it was a good day. The simplest decisions sent me into a panic and the thought of facing crowds was overwhelming. Many times, I walked to the front door of the church but couldn't go in. I felt guilty missing services but couldn't handle the sympathetic looks and questioning stares as I stood, weeping uncontrollably. I was paralyzed, imprisoned in a bottomless pit where loneliness and despair reigned, wreaking emotional havoc from their throne of darkness. I had no idea how I had gotten there and what was even more frightening was the fact that I had no idea how to escape! I did the only thing I could do. I cried out to God.

"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." (Psalm 40:1-2 NIV)

With that single heart cry, my journey from darkness into light began. The first step was to recognize the factors that can trigger depression; a lack of replenishing relationships, various chemical imbalances, and a poor self-image, just to name a few. One of the most common and deadly factors is failure to deal with the past. The "mire" mentioned in Psalm 40:2 means "sediment at the bottom." When our children were small, we frequented the beach. Wading out into the ocean, they took turns pushing a beach ball under water and counting to see who could hold the ball under water for the longest time. Eventually their arms would tire, or the ball would escape their control, popping to the surface. The "mire" in our lives is like that beach ball. The "sediment" or "junk" that we have never dealt with settles at the bottom of our souls, randomly popping up until we run out of energy to keep it submerged. Eventually, this mire works its way to the surface spilling ugliness and darkness into life.

"Mire" comes in all shapes and sizes - buried pain, unresolved anger, hidden sin or a great loss. I had never really dealt with my mother's death or faced some very painful parts of my past. As I looked back over my life a startling realization came - I had painted a picture in my heart and mind of how I *wanted* my childhood to be - not how it really *was*. I had spent my whole life running from the past by filling the present with frenzied activity. In the following weeks and months, the Lord and I sifted through the enormous pile of "mire" that had settled into my spirit and life. Together we faced experiences that I had carefully locked away until they slammed into my heart and mind with breathtaking force and fresh pain; an alcoholic father, the trusted family doctor who molested me, times of loneliness and rejection, haunting failures, unreasonable fears that were never spoken. It seemed as if the flood of polluted memories would never end!

But God is good - providing a defense mechanism for those experiences that are beyond our ability to face. He gently tucks them away until we are ready. When we bury pain alive, it keeps popping up at unexpected moments. Pain must be dealt with and buried...dead! Freedom from the pit of darkness demands a confrontation of our past, straining every experience through the truth that "all" things work together for our good. The will of God admits no defeat and penalizes no one. We can allow our past to defeat us or empower us. Harnessing the power of the past is a compelling weapon in the war against darkness.