

Theme: How Long, O Lord? (The Christian and Depression)

Readings: Psalm 6, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

"What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music.... And people flock around the poet and say: 'Sing again soon' – that is to say, 'May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, that is blissful.'" With these words 19th century philosopher and poet Soren Kierkegaard perfectly described why poetry has been such an enduring part of human culture. Good poetry plumbs the depths of human emotion and puts into words the almost indescribable details of passion, love, adoration, heartbreak, grief, and melancholy in such a way that the poet feels like a faithful companion staying with us through the ups and downs of life. We might even say that if the sciences are the language of the brain then poetry is the language of the soul.¹

It is no wonder then that the most influential book in Western history, the Bible, devotes so much space to poetry in the form of the Book of Psalms and the Song of Songs. Comprised of 150 poems written by several Psalmists, the Book of Psalms is a hugely important book of the Bible. It was the hymn book of the early church and was frequently quoted by Jesus. When he is on the cross he does something that has always struck me by its rawness; he quotes from Psalm 22 – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And this rawness is seen throughout the Psalms. Bible scholar N.T. Wright has a wonderful view of the message of Psalms: "Is it appropriate for the Psalmist to show his sin and anger towards God? Well God knows it anyway so let's bring it and dump it there."²

And this is why I'm excited about this new series going through the Psalms, because we are going to see a wide spectrum of human emotions from positive to negative and how those emotions help us in our relationship with God. Today I want to talk about the topic of depression (and to a lesser extent other mental illnesses) and what Psalm six tells us about how we are to look at it as Christians. I do at this point want to acknowledge that for some this is a sensitive subject that many people avoid talking about and I want to give fair warning that I will briefly touch on the topic of suicide. But I strongly feel that this is a topic we must talk about because the church cannot afford to ignore because it is a serious issue in our society.

Putting Things in Perspective

Statistics from 2013 revealed that one in six New Zealand adults had been diagnosed with a common mental disorder at some point in their lives.³ 14.3% of New Zealand adults have been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives and 6.1% have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders.⁴ However, I want to emphasise that these are only statistics for those who have been diagnosed and do not reflect the amount of New Zealanders who struggle with mental illness but never seek professional help, something that men in particular are at risk of. Because of this I suspect that the

¹ This is, of course, not to disparage the intellectual validity of the humanities.

² N.T. Wright, "N.T. Wright On the Psalms" (video), September 15, 2013, accessed July 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0pJ6zeJfa8>.

³ "Mental Health Foundation: Quick Facts and Stats 2014," Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, accessed June 12, 2016, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/Uploads/MHF-Quick-facts-and-stats-FINAL.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

actual numbers are higher than what the statistics suggest. In fact, I would bet that almost everyone in this room knows someone living with a mental illness and some of us have even either lost or came close to losing a loved one to suicide. Despite its prevalence, there is still a stigma surrounding mental illness in our society – whether it is the ideal that Kiwi blokes should be rugged, unemotional, and never showing weakness, the idea that we shouldn't burden others with our problems, or even the idea that mental illness just isn't as serious as physical illness.

We Must End The Stigma

And unfortunately Evangelicals have also contributed to this prevalent stigma. One way in which this has been done is to sweep the issue under the rug and pretend that it doesn't exist. A recent American poll by LifeWay Research found that 66% of preachers address the issue of mental illness in their sermons only "once a year, rarely, or never".⁵

Some of the stigma has come from bad theology surrounding mental illness. One prominent Evangelical pastor and theologian wrote in 1991 these damning words of Christians who seek professional help for dealing with mental illness: "Scripture hasn't failed them – they've failed Scripture."⁶ This despite the fact that we wouldn't say that someone who goes to the doctor for treatment for a physical ailment has failed Scripture. Another example has been the popular idea that suicide is an automatic one-way ticket to hell despite there being no biblical basis for this belief. On the contrary, I believe that the Bible paints a picture of a God who is merciful and understands our struggles. But how many families have had the tragedy of a loved one committing suicide after a battle with mental illness worsened by the belief that they're suffering eternally?

Still others have argued that it's wrong to take anti-depressants because they lessen our dependency on God and our sufferings are supposed to bring us closer to Him. However, as one writer rather wittily said: "*I'm surprised that I've never heard a Christian argument against epidurals. After all, the pain of childbirth is, according to Genesis, a result of sin. And one could probably argue that the extreme pain of giving birth brings one closer to God.*"⁷ Taking anti-depressants is no different from wearing glasses or taking painkillers – it is simply one of the miracles of modern medicine which God allows us to be healed through.

To The Depressed Christian

I suppose at this point as a preacher I'm supposed to say something spiritually grandiose and inspiring about the healing power of God. That you just need to declare that God will heal you of depression with all of your faith and God will heal you. And many people do get healed from depression. But many people don't. And if you're in the latter category you're probably a little sick of being told that you just need to have faith. So does this make you a defective Christian? Of course not! I suspect

⁵ Ed Stetzer, "The Christian Struggle with Mental Illness," Christianity Today, May 23, 2016, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/may/christian-struggle-with-mental-illness.html>.

⁶ John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ: Three Deadly Influences That Undermine Your Spiritual Life* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 58,77,89, quoted in Dwight Carson, *Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?: Helping (Not Hurting) Those with Emotional Difficulties* (n.p.: IVP Books, 1994), 16.

⁷ Rachel Stone, "Should Christians Take Antidepressants? A Response," Christianity Today, December, 2011, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/december/should-christians-take-antidepressants-response.html>.

that while many Christians rightfully reject the “health and wealth” prosperity gospel, many have adopted a “mental health and wealth” gospel in which someone who is faithfully serving God feels joy in all circumstances. But then what are we to do with Moses, Elijah, Job, and Jeremiah who were faithful servants of God yet not only did they suffer from depression but at times they even expressed suicidal desires!⁸ And if we consider David – a man after God’s own heart – who cries out in this psalm “How long, o Lord, will you let me suffer like this?”! How long must I endure this hell? Are you punishing me for something I’ve done? Or are you making a point at my expense? All of these are very raw and honest questions from David thrown at God.

This rawness is important because in the Bible we find a myriad of portraits of what it means to have faith in God. As we journey through Psalms we will see that it is a book filled with both hope and despair. And good poetry is like a faithful companion that journeys with us through the times of hope and despair in our lives. And I think the message of Psalm 6 is not to give us a scientific reason for suffering, but to tell us truth that speaks to our soul: that it is okay to not be okay.

But hold on to hope.

This stands in radical opposition to bad theology that says that Christians with depression are spiritually defective or don’t have enough faith. For too long people have suffered alone, afraid of being rejected or considered a burden. If this is you, if you’re suffering in silence, I want you to know that you are not alone. There are plenty of Christians who go to their respective churches every Sunday wearing masks, forcing themselves to sing songs they’re not sure they mean, hearing triumphant sermons about the healing power of Christ yet wondering why they’re still suffering after all this time. And I’m not going to give you an answer to why because I honestly don’t know. Maybe someone wiser than me has a brilliant theological argument on why some people suffer for a few years and some for a lifetime. But I don’t know.

But what I do know is that you don’t have to suffer alone.

There are other Christians who are going through and have been through the hell that is depression

If you are hiding your suffering from everyone around you please tell someone. The temptation, especially for men, is to think that you have to be strong and deal with this all by yourself. But there’s a reason why the Bible says that it’s not good for us to be alone. Because if you try to fight this all by yourself there is a good chance that it will kill you. Think about what people often say in the wake of a suicide: “we had no idea they were struggling with this”. If this is you please reach out and grab someone you trust. Tell them that you are hurting and that you’re struggling to keep your head above the water and that you need a helping hand. You are not a failure, you’re human.

To The Church

And, people, if you’re that person whom a struggling person reaches out to treat it as a sacred opportunity to speak love into a hurting person’s life. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5 that believers are to encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with all of them. The word

⁸ Numbers 11; 1 Kings 19; Job 3; Lamentations 1-5; from Dwight Carson, *Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?: Helping (Not Hurting) Those with Emotional Difficulties* (n.p.: IVP Books, 1994), 40.

translated as fainthearted is also translated as someone who is feeling depressed, anxious, or defeated.

But anybody who has been open about suffering from depression will know about the unhelpful advice that can come from others who mean well: “Have you tried not being sad?”, “There are people who have it worse than you; be thankful!”, or “Snap out of it!”. And in Christian culture we have our own platitudes such as “Perfect love casts out fear” and “God won’t give you more than you can handle” (now don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t turn to Scripture. But the first is a verse about Judgement Day and the second isn’t even in the Bible). I think the reason why we give simplistic advice is because we really do want to help but don’t know what to say. And I think this is in part because, historically, mental illness hasn’t been well understood and still isn’t entirely understood.

But the good news is that often the most helpful thing we can do is not to speak but to listen. In his book “Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?” psychiatrist Dwight Carson lists seven ingredients of a supportive relationship. The first three ingredients relate to simply listening – they are being trustworthy confidant, empathetic and non-judging. Fourth is being a non-patronising partner. Fifth and seventh are giving practical guidance and support such as baby-sitting. And sixth is offering encouragement that affirms what they’re going through.⁹ If you are someone who is already doing this I want to take this moment to thank you for the love you show others.

But, lastly, we must keep in mind that we are not professionals – nor are we expected to be. The church cannot meet every need and we don’t take the place of the highly trained men and women who have dedicated their lives to being therapists, doctors, and counsellors. Nor can we “fix” people (as much as I dislike that term). But we can speak out against unhelpful beliefs about mental illness. We can show others the love of the creator God who loves all of humanity in both our suffering and joy. And we can make our churches safer places for those who need kindness and a refuge to heal in.

⁹ Dwight Carson, *Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?: Helping (Not Hurting) Those with Emotional Difficulties* (n.p.: IVP Books, 1994), 125-126.