

HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

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INTRODUCTION

“Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say ‘My tooth is aching’ than to say ‘My heart is broken’. Yet if the cause is accepted and faced, the conflict will strengthen and purify the character and in time the pain will usually pass. Sometimes, however, it persists and the effect is devastating; if the cause is not faced or not recognised, it produces the dreary state of the chronic neurotic. But some by heroism overcome even chronic mental pain. They often produce brilliant work and strengthen, harden, and sharpen their characters till they become like tempered steel.”

R. Harvard, MD, “Appendix” to C.S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*

Mental and emotional pain are common in the experience of mental illness. Whether they are less dramatic than physical pain, I question, though I understand the quote above to be speaking of the inward nature of mental pain rather than the degree of pain. In fact, Dr. Harvard tells us mental pain is “more hard to bear.” I have had broken bones, undergone a number of surgeries, and given birth, and I have found physical pain easier to express. It feels more natural to accept physical pain as well, as I do not ask myself questions like, “Am I making this up?” or “Am I just being weak?” With mental illness, many shaming, self-berating accusations have assaulted me as I have struggled to sort out reality from my mind’s fiction.

What do I mean by mental illness? Regarding my experience, I am speaking of schizoaffective disorder—a combination of schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder, in my case. However, in this book, I will write about a broader category of conditions. The American Psychiatric Association defines mental illnesses as, “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior (or a combination of these)...associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities.” Mental health conditions include everything from anxiety and mood disorders to psychosis and thought disorders to eating disorders, personality disorders, dissociative disorders, and substance abuse. While I might not address each of these conditions specifically in this book, know that I am referring to the difficulties they present when I speak of “suffering” or “pain.”

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT

Before getting into what I want to discuss, I hope to clarify what this book is and what it is not. There are many issues to address when one talks about mental illness, and I do not want to let you down by allowing false expectations and then failing to meet them. While there are a wide variety of topics one might consider in relation to mental health conditions and the suffering they cause, I have a specific purpose in writing this book, which is suggested by its subtitle—Christian hope in mental illness. I hope to encourage you in your walk through life amidst the struggle of mental illness by describing what kind of response to our suffering will bring us hope, benefiting us and glorifying God. To avoid confusion over my intentions, though, allow me a bit of space to furnish you with what you might reasonably expect to find in the next chapters.

Causes of Mental Illness

First, as to the causes of mental illness, I certainly have my own opinions, but this is not the book in which I would like to expound on the subject. I will briefly describe my understanding of what gives rise to mental health conditions here in order to make clear the foundation on which I build my conceptions of mental illness, but this will be the last place I address the causes of mental illness other than tangentially.

Some will cite demonic activity, bad eating habits, lack of physical exercise and health, and a disordered relationship with God as sources of and primary barriers to overcoming mental illness. I believe that while these things can complicate mental health conditions, they are not the root cause in most cases. Neither do I believe fixing these things will completely rid a person of their psychiatric symptoms. Demons, self-neglect, and lack of discipline in one's spiritual life can certainly affect mental health, I will not deny. In many cases, they result from the struggle of psychiatric disorders. They are not, however, the way such mental and emotional imbalances normally arise.

Instead, I believe psychiatric illnesses can result from any combination of three primary sources—genetics and biochemical variances, environmental factors, and substance-induced irregularities. First, there are biological factors causing misfiring of neurons and imbalances of chemicals like dopamine and serotonin in the brain. Studies have shown a correlation between biological factors like these and mental illness. While some in the Church will disparage and deny the reliability of such studies, most do so based on a basic mistrust of anything scientific. I cannot contest scientific research simply because it is empirical “rather than Biblical” because I have not found that experiential knowledge always opposes what we know from Scripture. Setting empirical knowledge against Biblical knowledge creates a false dichotomy. Many times, what we observe in our world correlates and serves to corroborate what we learn from God's Word. When we must be careful is when something we deduce from experience and something we learn in the Bible contradict each other. At that point, we must trust Scripture. Our own perceptions, especially our emotional perceptions, are insufficient and often inaccurate due to the brokenness of sin, thus when discrepancies arise between our perceptions and the Word, we must fall back on what Truth God has provided us. However, the Bible is not a psychiatric handbook. It doesn't contain the definition of schizophrenia or discuss the cause of Panic Disorder. I do not believe it is anti-Biblical, therefore, to use the reason and tools God has given us to draw conclusions about mental illness and its causes, and I find the explanations for psychological disorders resulting from chemical imbalances persuasive.

Second, environment, especially during childhood, can play a central role in the development of mental illness. We know abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or otherwise, deeply affects those it visits itself upon, especially when it is present during an individual's formative years. A household in which one's safety is constantly in question or in which shaming is a consistent pattern causes a child to develop certain thought processes and emotional responses to life, driving him or her to anything from body-shaming anorexia to self-harming depression to trauma-driven anxiety. Many professionals say personality disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, result from maladapted relationships between a child and his or her parents. Not that we can point to an environmental feature or event as the cause of every mental health disorder, but one's surroundings and experiences can dramatically contribute to one's developed psychological dysfunctions.

Use of mind-altering substances, whether illegal drugs or mis-prescribed or misused medications, is the final factor I see as causing mental health disorders. Most times, mental illness caused by dangerous illicit substances are psychotic, causing a variety of delusions and hallucinations. This does not mean that I assume anyone experiencing psychosis has used or abused drugs. I experience psychosis and have never done so. However, I must acknowledge that psychosis and other mental health conditions, like anxiety, can result from such activities.

I reiterate I do not see demons, unhealthy diet or a lack of exercise routine, or a less than robust prayer and devotional life as the root cause of mental illness. Therefore, I will not present counsel on how to battle demonic forces, advice on how to eat healthy and develop patterns of exercise, or tips on how one can read the Bible and pray more. In the same vein, however, I do not feel the need to expound on what I see as the actual causes of mental illness—biological features, environment, and substance abuse. In the end, it is in some ways irrelevant how our mental illnesses got here. When I am in the middle of a depressive episode, I am not contemplating whether my serotonin or norepinephrine levels are off. Rather, I am contemplating things like self-harm and suicide and how those things would affect my loved ones. What I need in moments is not an explanation of the chemicals in my brain but restoration for my heart. I am looking for hope.

Coping Skills for Mental Illness

Similarly, I will not focus on specific coping skills. This is not because I see such tools as useless. In fact, using such skills as externalizing my thoughts in conversation, listening to encouraging music, taking a break from conflict, listing things I am grateful for, and doing things I enjoy have saved my life many times, and I believe my use of them has played a central role in my growth and development in mental and emotional stability. The reason I am not discussing these things in depth is because I believe there to be many resources for developing coping skills, whereas there are far fewer materials and programs available to us to learn a theology of mental illness. Put another way, I have learned from many people and experiences *what* to do in times of crisis, but I feel I have been lacking the answer to *why* I am suffering such crises and *how to process* the fact that I am in pain when I believe God to be good, kind, merciful, and all-powerful.

I want to be clear—this book is not a replacement for therapy, psychiatry, counseling, and coping skills. I fully encourage those struggling with mental health conditions to seek psychotherapy and medication, as these can be vital not only to our stability but to our survival. Some in the Church do not recommend therapy or medications and will discourage you from seeking help in those ways. This aversion to psychological and psychiatric support is something I hope to discuss in another book, one specifically addressed to the Church concerning mental illness. For now, suffice it to say I have found that learning practical tools for surviving extremely difficult and painful moments is not anti-Biblical or unspiritual. Some fear therapy and medication will replace faith and prayer in the process of recovery and coping, but I have found these things to work together rather than oppose each other. I believe God provides therapists who teach coping skills and medications that can ease symptoms for the purpose that we use them. I would not look to a therapist, secular or religious, for my theology or morality, but as long as the therapeutic relationship stays within the bounds of what God intended by it, I believe it can be beneficial and even God-glorifying. Medication, too, can be valuable in our struggle with mental illness. While medication is not a cure, it can reduce depression, anxiety, and psychosis to manageable levels so that we can think again and respond to our pain instead of just reacting.

A Cure for Mental Illness

Third, in this book I do not present a cure or solution for mental illness. I do not know that a cure for most mental health conditions exists outside a miracle or heaven. Most mental illnesses, by nature, are disorders that must be managed rather than ailments that can be healed. They are in that second category of mental pain as Dr. Harvard describes—“chronic mental pain.” It is “by heroism” we must subdue and live through our psychological and psychiatric struggles. Notice that Dr. Harvard does not use words that indicate finality or unburdened victory. He does not write that we vanquish mental pain or that we end it, but rather, he implies that the pain continues while we “overcome” it. Just as Dr. Harvard does not give an easy answer to pain, neither will I make a false claim to have found the answer to the suffering of mental illness. This book is not about a cure.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

So if this book is not about the causes of or cures for mental illness, what is it about? Foremost, it is about hope. I mentioned earlier that while many resources, whether books or therapists or medical professionals, answer the question of what to do in moments of crisis and how to cope daily with the symptoms of mental illness, fewer resources explain the “why” and “how to respond” of mental health diagnoses. I pose the questions in this way—why does God allow us to suffer with anxiety, depression, suicidalism, addiction, psychosis, and other mental health symptoms, and how does God want us to respond to these things in our lives? I hope you will find the answers I suggest helpful. I hope they will strengthen your sense of assurance for present and future good in the Lord.

Because mental illness includes a great deal of suffering and leads us to questions of what it means for God to be merciful and omnipotent yet still allow such agony, this book will in part be a commentary on suffering itself. I am no professional theologian, so what I write is a reiteration and reorganization of what I have read, heard, and learned as a layperson. My theology of suffering has been shaped by my interactions and conversations with individuals in the Southern Baptist seminary community; from watching others who

have contended with mental illness and other trying circumstances; from churches of which I have been a part that have preached and lived gospel hope; and of course, from my struggles, prayers, and wrestling with God amidst my own mental illness. Many books have been written about suffering, so I want to be more specific to mental illness, but I realize this book might very well apply to other struggles and trials common to humankind. I hope that while I might speak to more than psychological disorders, I will not neglect this subject in the process.

In writing about the suffering of mental illness, I intend to lead us into a Biblical and God-honoring response to such struggles. Bringing our lives into submission to Christ includes placing our suffering in his hands with trust and faith. It is not merely something we do in addition to yielding ourselves to Jesus but rather a means by which we do so. Our pain can bring us into closer communion with our Savior. Not that we ought to wish for or seek pain, of course, but God can redeem our pain and use it to mold us into a better likeness of his Son. As such, you will find this book built upon the assumption that while we certainly should pray for and seek healing of psychiatric illnesses, we can, in the meantime, accept their reality and use our suffering to praise the Lord and magnify His name. Our response to mental illness can then accomplish anything from our own sanctification to the encouragement of our brothers and sisters in Christ to evangelism among non-believers.

I will not pretend that I what I offer can do something other than help us come to grips with the hardships we endure, but I will not sell this book short either. What these pages present is driven by hope, finds its source in something profoundly personal, and indicates the genuine joy we can find in suffering when we submit our very selves to Christ. While hope, compassion, and joy will not drive our afflictions away, they offer the comfort we desperately desire and need. Knowing there is a “why” for mental illness, even if that reason does not fit with how we would like the world to be, brings consolation to our sorrows and reassurance to our suffering nonetheless. Knowing how God wants us to respond to the pain, uncertainty, and fear of psychiatric disorders offers a means for our obedience. Our obedience, in turn, ushers in the godly peace of knowing we have done what we are responsible and called to do. Once

we understand the why and how this book discusses, we can find ourselves at rest even during emotional and mental turmoil. I cannot promise you that mental illness will ever depart from you in this life, but I can assure you your suffering does not need to deprive you of the joy of the Lord, and indeed, it can be the very means by which you find that joy.

CHAPTER 5: ENGAGING WITH GOD IN OUR SUFFERING

I called on Your name, O Lord,
Out of the lowest pit.
Jeremiah, Lamentations 3:55 NASB

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.
Change and decay in all around I see.
O Lord who changes not, abide with me.

"Abide with Me" Henry Francis Lyte, 1847

"Can you pray?" my husband asked me, his voice quiet and strained.
His eyes were on me, unmoving.

I shook my head. Terror filled me, and I couldn't string together
more than a few words in my mind, much less out loud. At my
husband's suggestion, I tried inwardly to turn my attention to God to

beg Him for relief, but I found myself assaulted again by the voice, by the figure. It (I have always called the voice, “it,” for fear of giving it too much personality) told me that if I dared even think of my precious Savior, I must violently take my own life. Paralyzed emotionally, mentally, and physically, I felt the fear of utter helplessness wash over me again and again. Each time, the pain seared my mind and heart afresh.

This went on for several minutes. My husband reached out his hand to me, but I withdrew before he could touch me. Comfort was not for me, the voice shrieked. At that point, I turned to silent mantras of reassurance, trying to remind myself this episode would pass. Every time I tried to tell myself anything, though, the vicious voice interrupted every other word and reminded me of its warning. How was I to cry out to God, to anyone, with the threats the voice posed to me? I could tell myself I would never kill myself—I called my attention to the fact I did not even have a weapon with which to do so—but that did not change the horror of the images in my mind. My psychotic episode had reached its frightful climax.

Over the next twenty minutes, my panic and dread subsided. The voices grew quieter and spoke less frequently until finally, I could tell they and the figure were gone. Exhaustion took their place. I let my husband hug me to his chest. I did not pray with words as the psychotic episode came to a close, but I sensed a godly comfort come over me, and I gratefully lay down to sleep in peace. My soul’s fearful trembling had passed for the moment, yet I knew that didn’t mean what I had just experienced would not happen again. I closed my eyes with a sense of preparation, receiving in myself a holy strength for the dark figure’s inevitable return.

CRYING OUT TO GOD WITHOUT SHAME

We all know we ought to pray. Pastors encourage us to pray, we have accountability partners for the purpose of praying for each other, we write in prayer journals, we read books about prayer, we pray over meals, and most importantly, we read in the Bible things like, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, ESV) and, “pray at all times in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18, NASB). It is hardly necessary to remind us we ought to pray in the midst of our suffering and struggles with

anxiety, depression, and psychosis. In fact, it can frustrate us when people say not to worry and just to pray more about our conditions. It can even infuriate us when someone implies or outright states the persistence of our symptoms is the result of our deficient prayer life. The notion that mental health conditions would disappear if we just prayed more often or more earnestly is a variation on a common belief that suffering and afflictions result from some spiritual inadequacy or defect. While our adversity and distress could be God's judgment on our sin or the natural consequence of our trespasses, it is often more likely that the broken state of the world has given way to our illnesses. People's sins against us, such as abuse, and the generally fractured nature of things since the Fall of Adam and Eve are the most common reasons mental illnesses develop.

That being said, prayer can benefit a person struggling with a psychological disorder. The difference between prayer in the above philosophy and the prayers of the psychologically afflicted is this—while we cry out for relief from our mental and emotional pain, our conversations with God contain deep questions and grieving instead of just superficial faith and pretty words.

To some, our prayers can sound faithless. We might call out like the sons of Korah in Psalm 44:23-25:

Wake up, Lord! Why are You sleeping?
Get up! Don't reject us forever!
Why do You hide Yourself
and forget our affliction and oppression?
For we have sunk down into the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground. (HCSB)

Many of the psalms use similar language of abandonment in their laments. David himself writes:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Why are You so far from my deliverance
and from my words of groaning?
My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer,
by night, yet I have no rest.
Psalm 22:1-2 HCSB

Jesus quoted David's words on the cross. What would happen if we began our prayers thus, asking God where he is and describing our plight? If our brothers and sisters overheard us, some would comfort us—they might listen to us, take us out to coffee, and give us a shoulder to cry on. Yet really, many of us, even those who suffer from great pain, are more comfortable speaking like Job's friend, trying to root out the reason for our loved one's suffering, perhaps in the person's own mistakes, or to refocus his or her attention on God's promises and goodness. As a result, we find it awkward and even shameful to pour out our troubles before God, as though our suffering is dishonorable, our confusion faithless, and our desperate pleas for relief worthy of reprimand.

If we do not pour out our hearts, however, we risk burying our pain, which can lead to a multitude of other issues. Sometimes we admonish ourselves that we need to be more "heavenly-minded," as though our rewards and joys there somehow erase our present suffering. However, as R. C. Sproul writes in *Surprised by Suffering*:

The apostle [Paul] said he was "hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed." He made no attempt to mask his pain in a fraudulent piety. The Christian is not a Stoic. Neither does he flee into a fantasy world that denies the reality of suffering. Paul freely admitted the pressure he experienced.

We are not to be Stoics in this life, waving away our pain "in light of eternity." Suffering is common to the human experience and is nothing to be embarrassed about. To suffer carries no shame. Indeed, to confess our suffering as Christians, clinging to hope in Christ while at the same time admitting the struggle we have to keep sight of that hope, carries no shame either. Rather, we are called to raw honesty as much as we are to faith in our conversations with God, as we will see in the next section.

ENJOINED TO LAMENT

Not only is it not wrong to weep and air our misery to God, but many theologians who have spoken or written about suffering actually

instruct us to grieve before God and request his aid. R. C. Sproul writes:

It is no shame to call on [God] for help in times of trouble. It is His delight to minister to us in our time of pain. There is not scandal in the mercy of God to the afflicted. He is like a father who pities His children and moves to comfort them when they are hurting. To suffer without the comfort of God is no virtue. To lean upon His comfort is no vice, contrary to Marx. (*Surprised by Suffering*)

God is more perfectly compassionate than even our best human fathers, and as such, he desires to comfort us. We discover, in light of this divine desire, denying God the opportunity to console and cheer us is a way we steal his “delight.” It is not that he takes joy in our pain, but he takes joy in soothing and redeeming our pain. Bethany Barnard wrote a beautiful song about this entitled “Tears on Your Face” in which she wrestles with her diagnosis of depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. In the song, we find these lyrics:

I’ve gotta reconcile that
You don’t fast forward me through this
And I’ve gotta reconcile that
You want to know me when I’m like this
And I’ve gotta reconcile that
You didn’t change the diagnosis
And I’ve gotta reconcile that
You’ve reconciled it all in Your flesh.

We forgo an intimate moment with our Creator and Savior when we refuse to take our sorrows to him.

People throughout history have been discovering this closeness with God through suffering. To draw near to God, we must first bring our honest feelings before him. We can find many examples throughout the Bible—weeping, laments, and tears fill its pages. One can scarcely read through a book of the Old Testament without finding one person or another in sackcloth and ashes, bewailing a tragedy that has befallen him. Jacob mourns the loss of his son, Joseph, in Genesis.

The Israelites mourn Aaron's death in Numbers and Moses's death in Deuteronomy. The same Israelites weep over those dead from their civil war with the Benjamites in Judges. Naomi mourns her dead husband and sons in Ruth. Samuel mourns for Saul when God rejects him as king in 1 Samuel. David grieves over his son, Absalom, after Absalom flees Jerusalem after the murder he committed in 2 Samuel. Hezekiah tears his clothes when he hears the Assyrian king, Rabshakeh, taunt the Israel and her God in 2 Kings. Ezra fasts in grief over the exiled Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Mordecai covers himself in ashes when he hears about the king's decree for the murder of the Jews in Esther. Daniel has been fasting and mourning at the moment a vision comes to him of angelic conflict.

The rest of the Bible speaks of grieving and mourning as well. Looking past the Old Testament narrative sections into the prophetic, poetry, and wisdom books, we find such passages as these:

Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am weak;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are shaking;
my whole being is shaken with terror.
And You, Lord—how long?

...

I am weary from my groaning;
with my tears I dampen my pillow
and drench my bed every night.
My eyes are swollen from grief;
they grow old because of all my enemies.
Psalm 6:2-3, 6-7 HCSB

Even in the New Testament, amid the incredible journey of joy and relief in salvation, we find echoes of such grief. In Act, "devout men" mourn the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, as they bury him (Acts 8:2). John records that Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell of Jesus's misery in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus told the disciples, "My soul is swallowed up in sorrow—to the point of death" (Mark 14:34, HCSB). Jesus grieved with such exertion that "His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44, NASB). Both Old Testament and New Testament men and women experienced

desolation and anguish, and they communicated their suffering with very clear, outward expressions.

In light of this, we are free to express our sorrow and misery to God in moments of intense emotional and mental distress. We might be uncomfortable tearing our clothes, throwing ashes on our heads, and wailing out loud, but not only are we permitted to lament in prayer, but we are even encouraged to do so by these examples.

But why? What purpose does God have for us expressing our miseries to him? Surely to do so is to complain, and we know from the Israelites' example in the wilderness that God does not appreciate our grumbling. I believe we might find the answer in some of Solomon's wise words, not in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes but in 2 Chronicles in his prayer to dedicate the newly-built temple to the Lord. After humbly confessing God's faithfulness, calling God to fulfill his promise to David to always supply a king for Israel's throne, acknowledging God's majesty, and petitioning God to pay heed to the prayers made in or toward the new temple, Solomon prays:

When there is famine on the earth,
when there is pestilence,
when there is blight, mildew, locust, or grasshopper,
when their enemies besiege them
in the region of their fortified cities,
when there is any plague or illness,
whatever prayer or petition
anyone from your people Israel might have—
each man knowing his own affliction and suffering,
and spreading out his hands toward this temple—
May You hear in heaven, Your dwelling place,
and may You forgive and repay the man
according to all his ways, since You know his heart,
for You alone know the human heart,
so that they may fear You
and walk in Your ways
all the days they live in the land
You gave our ancestors.

2 Chronicles 6:28-31, HCSB

Saying, "Each man...spreading out his hands toward this temple," Solomon assumes the unique, personal relationship every individual has with God. Solomon's wording strikes me as particularly noteworthy. It breaks from the general pattern of the language in the Old Testament, which describes the relationship of the collective Israel with her God, YHWH. Many prophets speak of the nation as a single person, describing her as an unfaithful bride to the Lord. Even the covenants God made with individuals such as Abraham and Jacob in Genesis culminated in the covenant God would make with his people at Mount Sinai. Solomon includes this communal language in his prayer to dedicate the temple, but in 2 Chronicles 6:28-31, he breaks into speaking about individuals, "each man." He tells God that every person knows "his own affliction and suffering" and takes as a given that this personal knowledge will drive each individual to pray about his or her sorrows.

Solomon goes on to God's forgiveness and justice as a response to our confessions of suffering, "so that they may fear You and walk in Your ways." This phrase is key to understanding the purpose of bringing our pain to God. Solomon is saying our interactions with God in our suffering develop in us the appropriate attitude toward God, that is, that we would "fear" him. Also, coming to God with our afflictions helps us mature in obedience to God, or, "walk in [his] ways." Speaking our laments to God in prayer helps develop our relationship with him and guides us into greater maturity in obedience.

Solomon's prayer is just one of many places in the Bible where we are assumed or instructed to mourn and grieve when we find ourselves in trying circumstances. Whether it be fear of the next panic attack, feelings of despair and thoughts of suicide, or apprehension about the frightening unrealities that have invaded our consciousness in psychosis, the suffering of mental illness can drive us to God in prayer. Crying out to the Lord engages him in our struggles and allows him to respond to us in faithfulness with comfort and hope. In turn, God teaches us his character so we might properly respect and love him. In praying our laments, we rehearse our trust that God will answer us. We demonstrate our confidence in his mercy that he will not allow us to endure such misery senselessly and that in his justice

he will one day right all the wrongs that cause our mental and emotional pain. The more we train ourselves in this assurance, the more we are able to take joy in spite of and even because of our suffering.

HOW TO LAMENT BUT NOT GRUMBLE

I implied a few paragraphs back there is a fine line between lamenting and complaining. To define my terms with greater clarity, let me say this. When I use the word, “lament,” I mean we “express sorrow, mourning, or regret for, often demonstratively,” as the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word. Alternatively, we can “complain,” a combination of two definitions from the Merriam Webster Dictionary for the word to denote we “made a formal accusation or charge” as a way to “express grief, pain, or discontent.” In the first case, that of lamenting, we are merely communicating our emotional and mental reactions to difficult things in our lives, while in the second case, the one of complaining, we charge someone with wrongdoing for our plight, namely God. God permits and welcomes out expression of grief, but he does not deserve and will not abide our criticism.

It is not that injustice does not exist or that we did something to bring our psychiatric disorders upon ourselves. Trying to understand God’s kindness and sovereignty in light of our pain often confuses and discourages us, so let me assure you when we suffer from anxiety, depression, or psychosis, we do not suffer as those overlooked by God or as children being punished for some specific misbehavior. I will discuss God’s sovereignty later in this book, but for now suffice it to say that we suffer as creatures of the Fall, our bodies and minds broken by the effects of sin, just like the world around us.

For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God’s children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. (Romans 8:20-22, HCSB)

We suffer because of the corruption that came upon the world with the Fall, when Adam and Eve sinned and Creation broke under the consequences of their disobedience to God. Creation has been suffering, “groaning together with labor pains,” because God “subjected [it] to futility.” The King James renders the Greek work translated as “futility” in the Holman Christian Standard Bible instead as “vanity,” and the New International Version translates it, “frustration.” The Greek term itself denotes emptiness, unreality, purposelessness, instability, and frailty. It carries with it a sense of hollowness and senselessness.

Certainly we can relate to this futility and frustration in the fears, despair, and terrors we experience in mental illness. Anxiety evokes in us a sense of insecurity, depression brings feelings of purposelessness, and psychosis reminds us of our minds’ frailty and instability. Humankind inherited mental illnesses like we did other ailments and natural disasters—from the way sin shattered our peace with God and perverted organic processes, the functioning of nature, and man’s psyche.

Seeing as mental illness, along with many other forms of suffering and evil, is the result of the moral evil committed by Adam and his descendants, what right do we have to complain about what befalls us? R. C. Sproul writes in *Surprised by Suffering* that we have God’s permission (and even sanction, I would argue) to plead for justice when we have been wronged by another individual, but to bid God give us justice in our struggles in life would result in something far different than relief from our suffering. Sproul explains:

...I have every right to plead with God for vindication, even as Job did. Yet at the same time, I must not complain to God that He is at fault in allowing this suffering to befall me. In terms of my relationship to other people, I may be innocent, but in terms of my relationship to God, I am not an innocent victim. It is one thing for me to ask God for justice in my dealings with men. It is another thing for me to demand justice in my relationship with God. No more perilous demand could be uttered than for a sinner to demand justice from God. The worst thing that could possibly befall me is to receive pure justice from God.

We can surely grieve the pain that attends us, but we have no right to call for “justice” and expect to receive solace and healing from our afflictions—calamities and infirmities are much closer to what justice looks like than comfort. What we really want is God’s mercy.

Even when we are able to admit our suffering is not undeserved, we still have many questions for God. We see Job wondering some of these things.

I will say to God, “Do not condemn me;
Let me know why You contend with me.
“Is it right for You indeed to oppress,
To reject the labor of Your hands,
And to look favorably on the schemes of the wicked?
Have You eyes of flesh?
Or do You see as a man sees?

...

“Your hands fashioned and made me altogether,
And would You destroy me?
“Remember now, that You have made me as clay;
And would You turn me into dust again?
Job 10:2-4,8-9, NASB

What is man that You magnify him,
And that You are concerned about him,
That You examine him every morning
And try him every moment?
Will You never turn Your gaze away from me,
Nor let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
Have I sinned? What have I done to You,
O watcher of men?
Why have You set me as Your target,
So that I am a burden to myself?
Job 7:17-20, NASB

Like Job, we wonder why God afflicts us and why people who wrong us get away with it. We wonder why God would create us just to curse us? Why would he form creatures he knew would rebel and suffer all sorts of misery and torment as a result. When we think of

how God can use our suffering to grow us, we wonder like Job why God cannot just leave us alone to our immaturity.

Job asks all these things and even assumes God himself effected his torment. At the same time, Job does not blame or berate God for his suffering as though God is wrong in allowing or even sanctioning such afflictions. Neither does Job blaspheme God by turning to atheism, so he can believe God does not exist to cause his suffering, or to deism, in which he would believe God does not care enough to cause suffering. Elisabeth Elliot was a woman with her own sorrows and confusions in suffering, as she lost her first husband to martyrdom as a missionary to an Ecuadorian tribe. She held fast to God, however, and later worked to bring the same tribe members, those who had speared her husband, to faith in Christ. In firsthand wisdom concerning pain, she writes of Job:

Note that Job never denies God's existence, never imagines that his troubles come by pure chance. God has something to do with it, and [Job] has a thousand questions.

Job knows God is sovereign, therefore he asks the questions we often think but do not voice for fear of sounding faithless or irreverent.

My point in including Job's words and questions is to demonstrate that asking God such questions is acceptable to him. God praises Job in Job 42:7-9, saying Job has spoken rightly about him. Yet Job asked such questions as "Why does the Almighty not reserve times for judgment? Why do those who know Him never see His days?" (Job 24:1, HCSB) After the previous questions, Job goes on to explain how the wicked seem to triumph and wonders why God does not serve justice before us. Yet as we saw earlier, to truly call for God's justice would be cataclysmic, both for our own and the world's sake. Job shows us, however, that voicing our confusion is not blasphemy, and expressing our hurt and bewilderment is not sacrilege. It is when we accuse God of crime or offense that we cross the line.

WHEN WE CANNOT PRAY—RESTING IN OBEDIENCE

We know we should pray. Deep down, whether we do it or not, we know we need to cry out and engage God in our struggle. We know

there is hope in him and that his hope is ours if only we will receive it from him. Yet there are times we cannot cry out, when we can hardly even think of God, much less pray to him. There are times like the one I described in the beginning of the chapter—it felt as though terror severed my lifeline to God, stealing my ability to pray. There are other times we are simply in so much emotional and mental pain that we can't think of anything else. We cannot feel anything but the pain—not the need for God, not the pain we inflict through self-harm, not compassion for our families and friends who are affected by our despairing actions—nothing but our excruciating thoughts and emotions. There are times when we are so panicked we do not think about prayer as an answer, as all logical thought has abandoned us, fear and anxiety taking its place. What are we to do then?

Prayer and crying out to God all sound good, helpful, and right, until we run into these walls. In the moment, we can hardly imagine praying even the pained utterances we read from the psalmists and Job. It feels like we cannot speak anything at all to God in these moments. Does this mean we are faithless, effectively heathens, since we do not turn to our Rock amid our storms? Does our lack of prayer indicate a lack of trust or lack of obedience to Paul's command, "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6, HCSB)? Perhaps it does, though I would remind you this is not a problem unique to those with mental health conditions. In fact, I believe the reason God reiterates his call to prayer so often in the Bible is because prayerlessness is common to all humankind. While our distractions from calling out to God are completely understandable, their defensibility does not make our disregard for God acceptable. "...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NASB), according to Paul. Our fellow human being might sympathize with our impious responses to suffering, but we have all sinned, and our brothers' and sisters' appreciation of our situations does not make us right in how we react to our plights.

At the same time, God is compassionate. The author of Hebrews writes, "we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NASB). Strong's Concordance defines the Greek word translated as "weaknesses" in the New American

Standard Bible as “want of strength, weakness, illness, suffering, calamity, [or] frailty” and includes the struggles we endure in mental illness. The point of this verse is not only that Jesus was without sin but also that he was, in fact, tempted “in all things as we are.” Jesus understands painful emotions, as he experienced them in the flesh during his time walking this earth. He can “sympathize” with us in every way, and thus, while he condemns sin, he also provides a means by which we can communicate with him even when we cannot pray.

What is his provision? His Spirit is his provision to us. Paul describes the Spirit like this:

In the same way the Spirit also joins to help in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with unspoken groanings. And He who searches the heart knows the Spirit’s mind-set, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27. HCSB)

The Greek word for “weakness” in this passage is the same word we saw in the Hebrews passage in the last paragraph. God provided a means by which we can cry out to him even when we are speechless—his Spirit. The Spirit is our mouthpiece when we are struck dumb, our vocabulary when we are wordless, our intercessor when we fail to pray as we should. This does not mean we should forgo communicating with God in traditional prayer, but rather it shows that God is caring for us even when we cannot think of him.

During a psychotic attack, I might not understand or be aware of the fact the Spirit is praying for me. This does not negate the fact he is, indeed, praying. As with God’s existence, it is not our belief that makes the Spirit’s prayer real and effective. I can draw real comfort from the truth of the Spirit’s intercession for me—not by trying to convince myself it is true (and thereby effecting its true-ness) but by resting in its independent veracity and allowing that reality to wash over me. In the middle of psychosis, I can tell myself Jesus is with me, supplicating on my behalf, and will not forsake me. More than that, I can act on that truth. I might not be able to pray, but I can keep myself from self-harm and suicide by the knowledge that hope in Christ is not lost. In keeping myself from harming myself, I demonstrate that I trust in the

truth of hope in Christ. I trust in the Spirit to petition the Father for what I need, and I can listen and respond to God's truth even when my mind and heart speak otherwise.

ENGAGING BY LISTENING

I have realized that engaging with God goes two ways—speaking to him and listening to him. In the first case, we echo the psalmists, Job, Jesus, and other pious individuals in the Old and New Testaments. We express our pain, grief, and suffering to God through lament and prayer. Besides crying out, though, we have another mode of interaction with God—listening. This mode requires humility as well as an ear to hear what God is saying. We must be willing to respond to God's words and instructions when we listen, or we cannot say we are truly listening but merely hearing. As James writes:

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word but not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and it not a forgetful hearer but one who does good works—this person will be blessed in what he does. James 1:22-25 ESV

We are blessed when we heed God's instruction. John writes that keeping Jesus's word and God's commandments shows we are Jesus's true "friends" (John 15:14), reveals we are Jesus's true disciples (John 8:31), lets us abide in God's love (John 15:10-15), demonstrates we know God (1 John 2:3), and shows that God abides in us (1 John 3:24). Listening to and heeding God's words, even when we cannot directly speak to God about our woes, accomplishes all the things just listed.

I like to tell people the mere fact that I am still alive proves my faith and, more importantly, God's faithfulness—without hope that relief will come, whether in this life or the next, I would have taken my life long ago. There were many times I could have done so. In more difficult times, I have sometimes called it a "cursed hope," as in moments of deep depression, I want nothing more than for the

struggle to end and the agony to subside. In such moments, I see death as the only recourse. Without the mental capacity and strength God has provided me over and over again, I would not be here. God has blessed me with the ability and determination to act on what is true rather than on what I feel, and that has made all the difference. Sometimes, engaging with God and listening to him looks like simply clinging tightly to the truth we have learned during our more stable periods. Times of panic and havoc are not when we apprehend new truths, for the most part, but rather are when we learn how to cleave to old truths and define ourselves by what God has already spoken to us.

SUMMARY

Engaging with God in our sufferings has been the theme of this chapter, and I would like to use some space to bring all the presented ideas together. Let me begin by reiterating that while prayer is commanded by God and vital to our relationship with him, at the same time, it is sometimes the last thing we want or are able to do. Prayer is not the only way to engage with God in our struggles, however. Rather, obedience shows we are thinking critically about God's truths presented in Scripture and that we trust God in them. Between prayer, resting in the Spirit, and obeying God, we have three ways to connect with God in our pain.

Toward the beginning of this chapter, we saw it is not a shameful thing to cry out to God in raw honesty with the questions that gnaw our hearts. Asking God "why?" is not wrong, but rather, it is the practice of many of the faithful in times of trouble. Psalmists like King David, the righteous Job, and a host of men and women throughout Scripture mourn various types of emotional, mental, and physical pain and grief. Solomon himself asked that "each man" would pray to God for his own sorrows.

While we are enjoined to cry out to God about our suffering, we are also admonished not to complain. The Israelites grumbled about God's mercy toward them, blaspheming him by speaking regret about obeying his call out of Egypt. While we are allowed and invited to air our sorrows before God, we are not to accuse God of misdeeds in allowing us to be afflicted. God's justice is a terrifying thing, and to demand it thinking it will be our relief is a dangerous

misunderstanding. We are sinful, thus we rely on God's mercy to rescue us, not his justice. We must humble ourselves to understand and abide in our relationship with God, especially when the pain of mental illness tempts us to charge him with ill-doing. We can question, we can even doubt, but to make a claim that God is somehow wrong in what he has allowed and enacted is a perilous sacrilege and a miserable misunderstanding of his character.

While we properly respect and fear God's justice, we can draw comfort from his compassion, knowing the Holy Spirit is praying for us even when we cannot form the words to do so ourselves. This comfort might not assuage our panicked and despairing feelings, at least not immediately, but it can give us the strength to obey God while our minds bid us otherwise.

We also looked at what it means to listen to God when we cannot pray. Submission to God's commands is painfully difficult when anxiety, depression, psychosis beset us, but keeping God's truth in mind can spur us in the right direction. Obedience, like prayer, connects us to God and engaged him in our suffering by demonstrating our faith and hope in what he has told us.

To put this chapter in a sentence, joining with God to face mental illness is vital to our survival as well as commanded by Scripture, and it can look like desperate supplication and lament, resting as well as we are able trusting the Spirit is praying for us, or unswerving obedience to God's Word in the middle of emotional and mental turmoil.