

Explore the Bible: The Longing

August 9, 2017

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Aug. 27 focuses on Psalm 42:1-11.*

People who have suffered depression likely will hear their own confession in the words of the psalmist in chapter 42. I know I resonate with them. I have suffered from depression virtually all my life. I come from a family with a long history of depression.

I'm grateful for good and caring doctors who have helped me live a normal life by leading me to good medications. I'm also grateful for counselors and loving family and friends who have been compassionately willing to share this journey with me. Of course, David lived in a time when there weren't such doctors or medications. So, he did the only thing available to him. He cried out to God.

Begin with confession

He starts by confessing to God his deep need of communion with God in vv. 1-3. It sounds as if he senses he is all alone with his miserable soul. Depression tends to do that to people. It cuts them off from meaningful relationships with the very people who would help them find their way.

It hasn't always been that way. Depression tends to carry a social stigma. Or, in some cases, acknowledging one's struggle with depression can threaten one's employment. When we're out of emotional and spiritual steam, we often find ourselves hiding away out of fear about how others will react to our situation.

On the other hand, my confession of my own experience with depression often has opened doors of ministry that otherwise would have remained closed.

I've never thought of harming myself. However, I resonate with Parker Palmer who wrote that, while he'd not considered harming himself in his depression, he completely understood how some people get so low they think of death as the only way out (Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 2009).

Haunting questions

The psalmist longs to break out of his isolation and experience a personal encounter with the living God, although things had gotten so bleak, some are questioning why he still had faith at all. "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" (v. 3).

There are those who won't understand why a person is depressed. That's most certainly because they've never experienced it and can't comprehend why anyone else would.

In his isolation, the Psalmist wonders why he is so down. Two times in these brief eleven verses (vv. 5, 11) he cries out to himself: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?"

Depression is no greater mystery than to those who are lost in it. Often, it's impossible to identify any specific reason why depression has overwhelmed them. It's only been in the relatively recent past that depression has been understood as the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain that is very treatable and not as a result of spiritual or emotional weakness.

Depression can be worsened by the memory of times when life was good. "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving" (vv. 4-5). It's very sad when memories that ought to encourage us serve only to remind us of how far down we've gotten.

Loss of hope

Perhaps one of the worst feelings brought on by depression is that of hopelessness. When there is no “light at the end of the tunnel,” it’s easy to conclude that there is no light at all. It’s also easy to believe that even God is out to get you.

The psalmist put it this way: “Deep calls out to deep at the thunder of your cataracts (waterfalls); all your waves and your billows have gone over me” (v. 7). He feels as though even God has allowed him to be overwhelmed, as though stuck under a waterfall or at the mercy of crashing waves in the ocean. Feeling overwhelmed is certainly a symptom of depression.

Yet David remembers his history with God and, as a result, speaks to himself with tidbits of encouragement. We’re given the privilege of listening to his self-talk. “My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and Hermon from Mount Mizar,” (v. 6).

Trust in God

Having once experienced a deeply personal relationship with God, David is trusting God will again make himself known. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (v. 6). The God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in every step we take.

We will all experience what has been called “the dark night of the soul.” We should seek professional help if it stays dark for too long. There is help available.

And we should cry out to God by telling God anything we want without fear. We can trust God’s compassion. We should also take stock of the faithfulness of God and ask God to come and sit with us a while. Those honest cries to God hold in them the first glimpse of life we may have seen

in a long time.

In his beautiful song, "Untitled Hymn," Chris Rice sings: "Sometimes the way is lonely and steep and filled with pain. So if your sky is dark and pours the rain, cry to Jesus, cry to Jesus, cry to Jesus and live."

The Jesus who felt forsaken in the Garden on the night of his arrest and who sweat drops of blood is well acquainted with our deep sadness and will comfort us like the Good Shepherd he is.

Glen Schmucker is a hospice chaplain in Fort Worth.