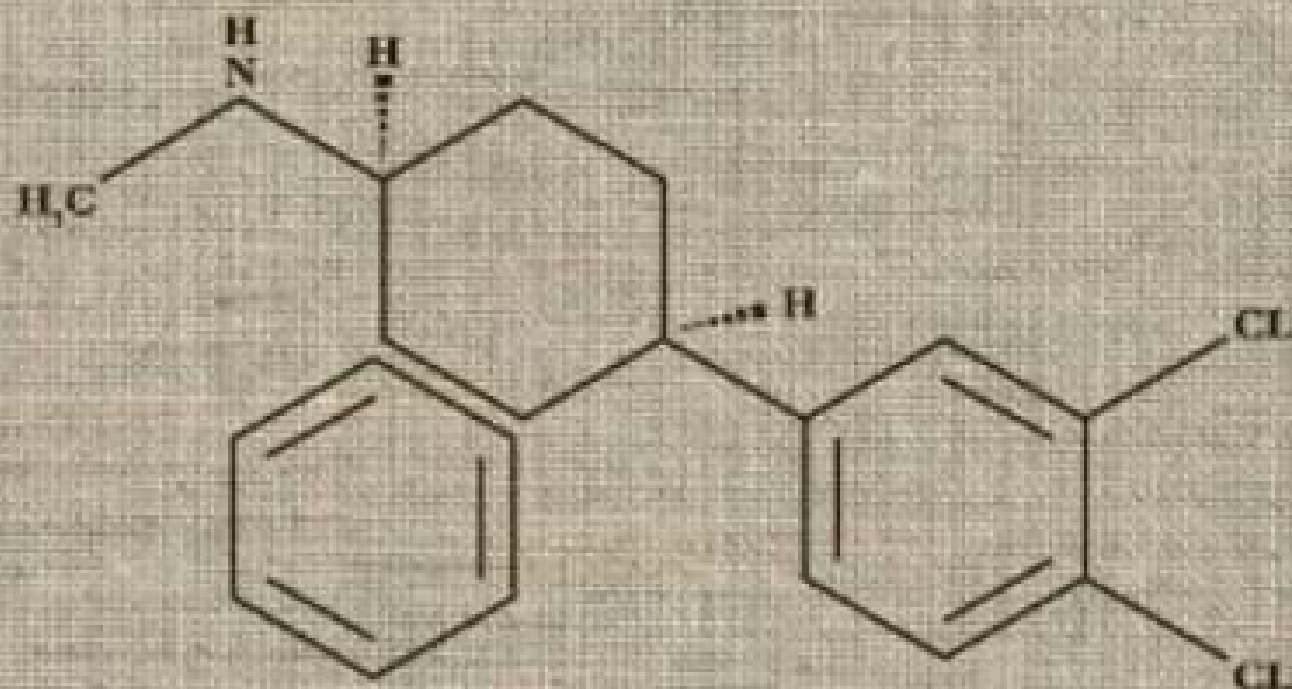


My Name is Hope

Anxiety, depression, and life after melancholy.

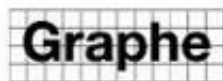
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Psalm 42

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long,

“Where is your God?”
These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the
house of God under the
protection of the Mighty
One with shouts of joy
and praise among the
festive throng.

Why, my soul, are you
downcast? Why so dis-
turbed within me? Put

your hope in God, for I
will yet praise him, my
Savior and my God.

My soul is downcast
within me; therefore I
will remember you from
the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep in the
roar of your waterfalls; all
your waves and breakers

have swept over me.

By day the LORD
directs his love, at night
his song is with me—
a prayer to the God
of my life.

I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten
me? Why must I go about
mourning, oppressed by
the enemy?” My bones

suffer mortal agony as
my foes taunt me, say-
ing to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

Why, my soul, are you
downcast? Why so dis-
turbed within me? Put
your hope in God, for I
will yet praise him, my
Savior and my God.

Preface

Some people wake up happy.

Others wake up sad.

I am one of those *other people*. You know—depressed people. The ones who walk around the planet with puffy eyes and frizzy hair.

Or maybe, better said, I was one of those people.

My story is one of failure and success.

Defeat and victory.

Ignorance and wisdom.

But more than anything, my story is one of healing.

Growing up, I was a happy enough kid. Healthy family. Great parents. Middle-class comforts. I was the archetypal artist—introverted, creative, passionate, melancholy. But depressed? Never.

Fast-forward to the year after high school. Nineteen years old. Wrapping up my first year of Bible college. Something inside me changed.

Almost overnight.

It was May of 1999. I was living in Mexico for a few months, working at an orphanage for handicapped children. Life was good. I was with a crew of 30 guys, all close friends. We spent the mornings learning the scriptures and the afternoons working around the orphanage. After growing up in Oregon where it rains year-round, I was soaking up the Baja sun. But something inside me

turned dark.

I started feeling sad.

Really sad.

I remember laying in my bunk at night and thinking, *Why am I down?*

Maybe I'm having a bad day, turned into maybe I'm having a bad week, turned into maybe I'm having a bad month, turned into what now?

By the fall I was a wreck. Completely falling apart. My emotions were slugging through the mud. On the outside, my life was really good. I was walking with God, surrounded by family and friends. But on the inside, I was a nervous wreck—stressed out, scared, uptight, wound up, driven to insomnia by the what-ifs that plagued my mind.

My friends and family were at a loss. They had no clue how to help. Nothing was working.

I was miserable, unhappy, tired, despairing. It was my first real brush with anxiety and depression.

I still remember the feelings...

My chest feels like it weighs a million pounds. I feel pressure on the back of my neck. Breathing takes effort. My mind spins and leaves me dizzy. My hands hang down, heavy and numb.

I was barely functional. I would sleep for ten hours a night and wake up dead tired. I would read the scriptures for two hours a day and walk away breathing at best. I would pray and rant and hope and scream, but God was a concrete wall in the sky.

Dark.

Demonic.

Hellish.

These are accurate words to sum up two years of my life.

And hope starts flickering out. *Will I always be miserable? Will I always feel sad? Is this just who I am?*

Suicide sounds crazy and illogical...until you know what hell on earth is like.

It's like drowning. Like someone holding your head under water as fear screams through your body.

It's like suffocating. Like someone pushing your head into a pillow as you thrash about in violent panic.

It's when you get so down, so miserable, that death sounds like the ultimate release. You will do anything to stop the pain.

Every night I would drive over the I-5 freeway on my way home. I remember the taunting roar of the overpass...

Yank the steering wheel to the right.

End the pain.

Why go on living? You will be like this forever. There is no hope.

Death is the only escape.

By the grace of God, my tires stayed inside the white lines.

I was, and still am, a follower of Jesus. I knew right from wrong. Suicide is the easy way out, for the lazy and weak.

I remember thinking, *I can stay alive, but I can't go on living like this.*

After a few years, it came to a head. I hit rock bottom.

And he found me there. Torn apart. Beaten up. All that was left were scraps and pieces of the man I used to be.

I will never forget the day. Right in the middle of all my misery. Despair was looming like a monster in the dark. I was at church. I had just finished teaching for a Friday night gathering of college students called *The Way*. I was standing by the stage, faking it to a huge crowd of people pressed all around me, when a stranger walked up to me. She looked at me in a really awkward way and said nothing. I stretched out my hand to break the silence, still faking a smile and hiding the all-too-real pain inside.

“Hey, my name’s John Mark.”

I will never forget her short, terse words...

“My name is Hope.”

Everything was a blur after that. I think she turned around and walked away, melting into the crowd. I have no idea who she was. I never saw her again. But when she spoke those four words, it was like God was shouting at me from heaven.

Hope!

John Mark, don’t give up. Healing is possible...in me.

I wish I could say healing came then and there—that God hit me with a lightning bolt, knocked me out, and when I came out of it I was as sanguine and happy as San Diego on the Fourth of July.

In reality, that day marked the beginning. God started me down the long, hard, brutal, difficult, amazing, transforming, saving path toward healing. It would take many years, include highs and lows, and follow the pattern of “three steps forward, two steps back.” But at least now I was going somewhere. Hope breathed motion into my sails and catapulted me onto the longest journey of my short life.

This book was born out of my story. My journey from brokenness to healing. From anxiety to peace. From depression to joy.

I am not a doctor.

I am not a therapist.

I am not a psychologist.

I am a follower of Jesus who went through the horrors of anxiety and depression and came out the other side—stronger, wiser, and with more joy than I ever thought possible.

Don't get me wrong. There are still days when I fight to wake up on the right side of the bed. I am a work in progress. But Jesus is remaking me from the inside out. I am a new man.

My goal through this book is to pass on the wisdom I learned from my years in “the valley of the shadow of death.” My prayer is that you—wherever you are coming from— would find hope in the healing, saving, redeeming Person called Jesus.

MOVEMENT ONE

The Power of Solidarity

You are not alone.

I repeat...

You are not alone.

For years I thought I was the only one who struggled with anxiety and depression.

Questions were always lurking in the back of my mind, haunting me.

What's wrong with me? Godly people don't struggle with depression. Why am I sad?

Is my faith real? Am I a fraud? Am I crazy?

The scriptures teach, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." [\[1\]](#) Why does the formula break down with me? A plus B doesn't equal C. Prayer and Bible study don't make me happy. I finish my "time with God" and still I'm a wreck. The math doesn't add up.

Is God's Word true? Are the scriptures trustworthy?

All the other Jesus followers are happy and smiling. Why am I alone in my hell?

I love God. Yet I'm still depressed.

I still remember walking out of the doctor's office with my first prescription of Paxil. I sat in my car holding the paper note with the doctor's scribbles: Take one a day, with food, before bed. May cause insomnia, nausea,

impotence...you know the list.

How did I get here? Am I a failure? Am I weak?

In my mind, I was the only one of my friends, the only one in my church, the only one on the planet who struggled with anxiety and depression.

Maybe you are feeling the exact same way. Like a failure. Shame. Defeat. You are hiding your inner turmoil from your family and friends, scared of what people might think. You think you are alone. I was there.

I was dead wrong.

Staggering numbers of modern Americans fight anxiety and depression.

In 2010, more than 253 million prescriptions were written for anti-depressants in the U.S. [\[2\]](#)

Did you catch that? 253 *million*.

The nation only has 311 million people!

Words like *pandemic* come to mind.

Were eighty-plus percent of Americans really prescribed anti-depressants last year?

What gives?

Anti-depressants have become the second highest volume drug in the U.S. Only medications for cholesterol trump them in annual expense. In fact in 2010 alone, Americans spent \$11.6 billion on anti-depressants. [\[3\]](#)

Yet in spite of this reality, more than 34,000 people go the route of suicide every year.

That's 94 suicides per day.

One every 15 minutes.

And for every “success,” there are more than 100 attempts.

It is the third leading cause of death among teenagers. [\[4\]](#)

And don’t think for one minute that Jesus followers are immune.

The Bible is chock-full of stories about men and women who wrestled with the demons of anxiety and depression—some for brief periods of burnout and despair, and others for decades.

One of the many things I love about the Bible is God’s brutal honesty. Most of the heroes of the Bible are normal, everyday people—people with flaws, baggage, issues.

Humans.

People like you and me.

The biblical authors make no effort to airbrush or spin the great figures of the Bible.

Job, Moses, David, Elijah—every single one had problems and issues.

And it’s *really important* to know the stories of the Bible inside out.

For my entire life the Bible has been part of my daily rhythm. I wake up and first thing, I get into the scriptures.

I read.

And I listen.

The scriptures are God’s Voice to mankind. During the dark years of my fight against anxiety and depression, God’s Spirit used the scriptures to breathe life into me, day by day. In the stories of the Bible I found solidarity. Turns out, I wasn’t alone in my struggles. And in solidarity, I found hope.

That’s why it’s really important to know the Bible. It is written, “These things occurred as examples...”[\[5\]](#) When we read the stories, we find

ourselves on the pages. Elijah's story is my story. Hannah's tears are my tears. David's prayer is my prayer.

Let's join the story.

Job

Many scholars think Job is the oldest book in the Bible. And what is Job about?

Suffering.

The story starts with a rich, healthy, blessed man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."[\[6\]](#)

But in one day, Job's life falls apart. God unleashes Satan's twisted torture upon his most faithful follower.

A band of marauding Sabeans kill all his servants.

The Chaldeans steal all his flocks and herds.

A great wind comes up and pulls down the house on his family, killing his sons and daughters.

And to top things off, Job ends up with boils all over his body.

You think your life is hard?

At first Job responds with faith. He speaks the famous words, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, may the name of the LORD be praised." [\[7\]](#)

But by the end of the story, his faith fails and he ends up writing really depressing poetry:

"And now my life ebbs away;

days of suffering grip me.

Night pierces my bones;

my gnawing pains never rest.

In his great power God becomes like clothing to me;

he binds me like the neck of my garment.

He throws me into the mud,

and I am reduced to dust and ashes.

I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer;

I stand up, but you merely look at me.

You turn on me ruthlessly;

with the might of your hand you attack me.

You snatch me up and drive me before the wind;

you toss me about in the storm.

I know you will bring me down to death,

to the place appointed for all the living.”[\[8\]](#)

Sometimes we mimic Job’s story. Something hard, tragic, gut-wrenching happens. At first we have faith. We say all the right things. We put on a good face. But after a while, the pain eats us up from the inside. We get tired of putting on a good face. The truth comes out.

We blame God.

We doubt, wrestle, question...

Why me?

You are not the first person to ask that question.

Hannah

The first book of Samuel opens with the story of a man named Elkanah. As was common in his day, he had two wives: Peninnah and Hannah. Today we know Hannah as the mother of Samuel, the first prophet of Israel. We think of her as the archetypal picture of a godly woman. But the story opens with a different image.

“Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.”[\[9\]](#)

Hannah is barren.

Now, in the ancient Near East, fertility was a sign of God’s blessing. The more children you had, the more God loved you. But the opposite was also true. If you were barren, you were cursed by God. Today we look back and think, *what a stupid, pre-modern, unscientific understanding of fertility*. But superstition is embedded deep in every culture. Hannah was born into a world where everyone around her thought she was cursed by God.

The story goes on...

“Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival [the other wife] provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah, her husband, would say to her, *Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?*”[\[10\]](#)

Sound familiar? You are an emotional wreck. Your appetite wastes away. People around you are asking what’s wrong. Loved ones are scared. People don’t understand.

The next part of the story shows us Hannah in the temple. She gets down on her knees and “*In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.*”[\[11\]](#) She asks God to look on her misery, and she begs him for a

child.

There's a priest named Eli who is watching her from a distance. She looks so distraught that Eli thinks she's drunk and rebukes her. She fires back, "I am a woman who is *deeply troubled*. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here *out of my great anguish and grief*." [\[12\]](#)

That seems to soften Eli because he responds by saying, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." [\[13\]](#)

There is a happy ending to the story, but the beginning sets a somber backdrop. Who knows how many years Hannah was barren? One? Two? Twenty? Forty?

Do you ever feel like the outcast? Like everybody thinks you're crazy? Do you ever question God's love for you? Do you ever wonder why years go by with no answer from God?

Does your depression rob your appetite? Steal all flavor from your mouth? Make you weep for hours at a time?

Do you ever feel "bitterness of soul?" What about "deeply troubled?" Or perhaps "great anguish and grief?"

You join in the story of Hannah.

Elijah

Years go by and a powerful prophet named Elijah comes on the scene. The book of 1 Kings records one of the darkest moments in the prophet's life. Here's the context.

Elijah is fresh off a climactic victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. God sends fire from heaven on the altar. The prophets of Baal are exposed as frauds. The entire nation of Israel repents and turns back to God. Elijah prays and God ends three brutal years of drought with a torrential

downpour. The prophet runs across the Jezreel Valley, on a high, joy throbbing through his veins.

But the story twists when the sadistic, murderous Queen Jezebel, who brought Baal worship to Israel, hears her prophets are dead.

“Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, *May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.*”[\[14\]](#)

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

(Meaning, the man who took on 450 prophets of Baal and an entire nation of idolaters was scared out of his mind by this one woman.)

He drops everything, ditches his servant, and runs an entire day’s journey into the wilderness. When he gets there, he sits down by a broom bush and the text says, “prayed that he might die.” His prayer gets worse: “*‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’*” Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.”[\[15\]](#)

To clarify: He asks God to kill him.

I’m not a psychologist, but based on the text, here’s my diagnosis:

“Elijah was afraid.” Anxiety.

“I have had enough.” Depression.

“...ran for his life.” Paranoia.

“Take my life.” On the verge of suicide.

Do you ever feel like the highs of your life are followed by deep, dark lows? Like the world is out to get you? Like there’s no point in going on, you might as well give up now? Like you would give anything for God to kill you? You’re in good company.

Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel, but he got to a point where he was so low, so depressed, all he could pray for was death.

David

The book of Psalms is a compendium of ancient Hebrew poetry and music. One author called the Psalms “the anatomy of the soul” [\[16\]](#) because it gives us a window into the deepest parts of humans. The Psalms are replete with raw, unedited emotion: anger, fear, hate, joy, peace, anxiety, depression, bitterness, guilt, shame, freedom, gratitude, envy, doubt, trust—every human emotion finds a voice in the Bible.

The stoic denial of negative emotions, common in Christians today, is completely foreign and alien to the biblical authors.

We think about two-thirds of the Psalms were written by a man named David. He was the typical artist: melancholy, creative, expressive, brilliant, passionate, unstable, marked by ups and downs. And God built him with the ability to turn his emotions into lyrics.

You are about to read some excerpts. *Do not tune out right now.* David’s poetry was instrumental in my healing. Take a deep breath. Quiet your mind. Read *slowly*. Think deeply about the weight of his words. They are powerful.

In Psalm 6 he writes...

“Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;

heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.

My soul is in deep anguish.

How long, LORD, how long?

...I am worn out from my groaning.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping

And drench my couch with tears.

My eyes grow weak with sorrow;

They fail because of all my foes.”

In Psalm 13...

“How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?”

In Psalm 18...

“The cords of death entangled me;

the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

The cords of the grave coiled around me;

the snares of death confronted me.”

And to make matters worse, he also writes things like...

“The king rejoices in your strength, LORD.

How great is his joy in the victories you give!” (Psalm 21)

“Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;

it is fitting for the upright to praise him.

...Sing to him a new song;

play skillfully, and shout for joy.” (Psalm 33)

“Praise the LORD.

Sing to the LORD a new song,

his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

Let them praise his name with dancing

and make music to him with timbrel and harp.

For the LORD takes delight in his people;

he crowns the humble with victory.

Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor

and sing for joy on their beds.” (Psalm 149)

When I read David’s poetry, the word *bipolar* comes to mind. One minute he’s on top of the world, and the next he’s in the depths of despair—sometimes in the same Psalm!

Are you like that? Up and down? High-highs and low-lows? A melancholy wreck? Always swinging the pendulum of joy and despair, faith and doubt, trust and fear? Like David?

Do you know what God called David? A man after his own heart.

God allowed a flawed, emotional train wreck to lead Israel—his chosen people. But not only that, he took David’s raw, brutally honest lyrics—gushing with fear, anxiety, doubt, depression, and questions about God’s faithfulness—and made them part of the inspired scriptures.[\[17\]](#)

God is not shocked by your emotions. No matter how messed up your soul may be, God is right there with you, listening.

Heman the Ezrahite

Not all of the Psalms were written by David. Some were penned by the Sons of Korah, a group of musicians and songwriters who worked for the temple, fueling the nation of Israel with songs for worship. One of the Sons of Korah was a poet named Heman who wrote Psalm 88. His lyrics sound more like venting and screaming at heaven than composing worship songs.

Listen *carefully* to his chilling words.

“LORD, you are the God who saves me;

day and night I cry out to you.

May my prayer come before you;

turn your ear to my cry.

I am overwhelmed with troubles

and my life draws near the grave.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit;

I am like one without strength.

I am set apart with the dead,

like the slain who lie in the grave,

whom you remember no more,

who are cut off from your care.

You have put me in the lowest pit,

in the darkest depths.

Your wrath lies heavily upon me;

you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

You have taken from me my closest friends

and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape;

my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, LORD, every day;

I spread out my hands to you.

Do you show your wonders to the dead?

Do their spirits rise up and praise you?

Is your love declared in the grave,

your faithfulness in Destruction?

Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,

or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

But I cry to you for help, LORD;

in the morning my prayer comes before you.

Why, LORD, do you reject me

and hide your face from me?

From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;

I have borne your terrors and am in despair.

Your wrath has swept over me;

your terrors have destroyed me.

All day long they surround me like a flood;

they have completely engulfed me.

You have taken from me friend and neighbor—

darkness is my closest friend.”

I would argue Psalm 88 is the most dark, graphic, callow, uninhibited, gothic passage in the entire Bible. Most of David’s Psalms, no matter how low and tumultuous he feels, end in hope. But not Psalm 88. Heman’s closing words are, “Darkness is my closest friend.” No hope. No horizon. Little or no faith. Violent anger against God for the emotional carnage of his soul.

Darkness is my closest friend.

And Psalm 88 was *one of the worship songs from the temple!*[\[18\]](#)

Are you serious?

Why in the world would the God who wants faith, trust, hope, joy, and peace from his people, listen to his people pray Psalm 88? Why are lyrics like “I have borne your terrors and am in despair” called *God-breathed?*[\[19\]](#)

Maybe because sometimes the best of us come to a place of absolute despair, at the end of faith, peering over the edge into the abyss, wondering what’s next?

Most people don’t sink as low as Heman. But some of us do. And in those moments of despair, God invites us to worship in the vein of Heman, with piercing honesty and exposed hearts, holding nothing back.

Jesus

It's easy, or at least possible, to write off the stories of Elijah, David, and other great men and women of God from the past. They were imperfect, flawed people. If only they had more faith, more trust, more—something—they would have been okay. That makes us 100 percent responsible for anxiety and depression.

The problem with that theory is the fact that Jesus was sad.

Yes, you heard me right. Jesus—who was perfect, sinless, without a speck of moral deficiency—was sad. Maybe not depressed, but he was no stranger to emotional pain. In fact, the prophet Isaiah calls him, “A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.”[\[20\]](#)

In John 11 we read a heartbreaking story. Jesus was really close friends with three siblings: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These were people he loved and enjoyed. But almost overnight, Lazarus, the older brother, gets sick. Life was a fragile commodity in the first century. The sisters send for Jesus, hoping the miracle-working prophet will rush to Bethany and heal Lazarus at the eleventh hour. But by the time Jesus gets to the house, Lazarus is dead.

Jesus follows Mary, Martha, and the mourners to the cemetery where Lazarus is buried in a tomb. And he responds to the death of one of his closest friends like any healthy human would. The text says:

“Jesus *wept*.

Then the Jews said, ‘*See how he loved him!*’

But some of them said, ‘*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*’

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.”[\[21\]](#)

The story goes on and ends with the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus. Most people read the story and focus on the divine, supernatural power of Jesus over death. But in doing so it's easy to miss the profundity of John's two

bare-bones, honest words: “Jesus wept.”

Jesus—the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior, the Prince of Peace, the Creator of the universe—wept.

The Greek word John uses is **δακρύω** (*dakruo*), which is a really emotive, lurid word. *Dakruo* can be translated “sobbed” or “convulsed with grief.”

And the phrase *deeply moved* is violent in the original language. It can be translated “torn up inside.” He’s writhing in emotional pain.

Jesus lives in a fallen, cracked world where disease and death and tragedy and heartache are a part of life. Jesus, in his humanity, [\[22\]](#) feels disturbing human emotions deep in his soul. He feels the weight of grief over the loss of one of his best friends. He is “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”

The Creator himself is not spared from the assault of creation’s sorrow.

Empathy and escape

Hannah, Elijah, David, and Jesus are just a few samples from the biblical narrative. We don’t have time to look at Jeremiah and his lifelong battle with depression, [\[23\]](#) or Solomon and his years of disillusionment and despair, [\[24\]](#) or Paul and his unnerving honesty about the sorrows he faced. [\[25\]](#)

There’s an entire book in the Bible called Lamentations devoted to expressing depression to God.

Down through history, great leaders in the faith like St. Bernard, C.H. Spurgeon, and Mother Teresa have faced the “dark night of the soul.” [\[26\]](#)

My point is simple: the scriptures are honest and transparent about the fact that lots of godly, powerful people struggled with anxiety and depression.

Whatever you are going through, *you are not alone*. Others share your pain. Other godly people of faith—from Moses to Mother Teresa—know what it’s like to deal with anxiety and depression.

Solidarity is one of the most encouraging forces in the human experience. To know you are not alone—other people feel your pain, empathize with your struggles, and are ahead of you on the road to healing—breathes hope into your soul.

No matter what fight, war, dysfunction, pain, sorrow, tragedy, struggles you are up against, there is always a way out. Many other godly people have walked through the same valley and come out the other side. When you sink deep into your hell, when you feel like the end is right around the corner, when you think there is no way out—God is there. Right at your side. He is faithful to hear your whispers for help. And he will show you the path of life.

There is always hope.

[1] Nehemiah 8v10. Spoken by Nehemiah to the Hebrews who are weeping in the city of Jerusalem.

[2] Stats taken from the IMS Health Report for 2010.

[3] IMS Health Report for 2010.

[4] Center for Disease Control and Prevention: the definitive resource on public health and safety.

[5] 1 Corinthians 10v6. Paul is alluding to the story of the Exodus, but in doing so, he includes all the biblical stories.

[6] Job 1v1. The book literally starts with that line.

[7] Job 1v21.

[8] Job 30v16-20.

[9] 1 Samuel 1v2.

[10] 1 Samuel 1v8.

[11] 1 Samuel 1v10.

[12] 1 Samuel 1v15-16.

[13] 1 Samuel 1v17.

[14] 1 Kings 19v1-2.

[15] 1 Kings 19v3-5.

[16] Most people give C. H. Spurgeon the credit for that quote, but actually, I think he was ripping off John Calvin from *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. In the words of Albert Einstein, “The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.” (Never mind the fact that it’s also plagiarism!)

[17] I *absolutely* buy in 110% to the idea of the scriptures as inspired and authoritative. 2 Timothy 3v16 says, “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” Most translations have, “All scripture is inspired by God.” But the NIV does a great job. The Greek phrase is literally, “breathed out by God.” By

“inspired” I don’t mean David received good creative energy from God. I mean God’s Spirit breathed out truth through David’s heart, mind, fingers, and papyrus. That doctrine (the technical term is *inerrancy*) becomes really striking when you read a book like Psalms. God allows all kinds of raw, emotive language in the scriptures.

[18] For centuries the Jews used the Psalms as a compendium of worship songs (in today’s language) to sing at the temple. If you want to learn more, pick up *How to Read the Psalms* by Dr. Tremper Longman III. His book is almost as cool as his name.

[19] Again referencing 2 Timothy 3v16 in the NIV.

[20] From Isaiah 53v3. The NIV translates “a man of suffering,” but all the other translations use “sorrows.”

[21] John 11v35-38.

[22] In spite of how many modern Jesus followers think of Jesus as “God in a body,” the orthodox, historic doctrine of the incarnation has always been that Jesus was fully God *and fully human* at the same time. In his humanity he gets tired, hungry, sad, he asks questions, and in the end, he dies. All that to rescue humanity. For more content on the humanity of Jesus, feel free to download one of my sermons called *The Humanity of Jesus* at ajesuschurch.org/teachings/thestoryofjesus.

[[23](#)] The entire book of Lamentations.

[[24](#)] Have you read Ecclesiastes lately? Really, really depressing stuff.

[[25](#)] 1 Corinthians 4v9-13 and 2 Corinthians 11v23-30.

[[26](#)] “The dark night of the soul” was a term used by Saint John of the Cross (a Catholic mystic) to express times of darkness and despair in Jesus’ followers.

Information on the depression of St. Bernard, Spurgeon, and Mother Teresa can be found in their corresponding biographies.

Wells and Buckets (defining terms)

Words are fuzzy.

Imprecise.

Sloppy.

Words mean different things to different people, depending on background, context, language, and upbringing.

My neighbors are from England. They say things like—*Cheers. Ace. Smashing. Where's the queue?*

We both speak English, but half the time I don't understand what they are saying.

We need to pin down exactly what we mean by anxiety and depression. We also need to clarify the difference between anxiety and fear, and depression and sorrow.

God built us as emotional creatures. We feel. Sometimes we feel deeply. Fear, sorrow, grief, agony, and wonder are not bad. These are human emotions.

Can you imagine if life was one monotonous, mundane, sterile, flat line? No ups and downs. No variety—highs, lows, twists, turns, good days, bad days, valleys, mountaintops. These experiences are what it means to be alive.

I have a friend who lives in San Diego. Do you know what he complains about? The weather! It's 75 degrees and sunny *all year long*. He craves rain and cold and colors on the trees and rhythm in creation. Yet all he gets is one, long, perennial summer. He lives in the modern Garden of Eden, and he's

bored.

Life without the full spectrum of human emotions is empty and dull. God made us to feel. But we are a generation scared to feel deeply. We are scared of death, grief, honesty, sorrow, suffering, hardship, pain. We are scared to feel human. Yet running away from reality never gets you anywhere but lost. Life catches up and sucks you in. At some point, you *feel*. The good, the bad, and the ugly. The ups and the downs. And sometimes those downs become steep drops into anxiety and depression.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety: noun.

1) A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

2) A nervous disorder characterized by a state of excessive uneasiness and apprehension, typically with compulsive behavior and/or panic attacks.[\[1\]](#)

Some bad feelings are really healthy, like fear. When you are on a plane and it's about to crash, *you should be afraid*. When your legally blind great-grandma offers to drive, you should be scared to death! Fear is not always bad. But when fear becomes perverted and warped into something long, lasting, and drawn out, you end up with something called anxiety.

Anxiety is when fear takes over your mind.

Anxiety is when fear moves from the tangible to the hypothetical.

Anxiety is when the what-ifs of life suffocate your brain.

Anxiety is when you can't fall asleep at night.

Anxiety is when you can't relax and take a nap.

Anxiety is when your mind won't turn off.

Anxiety is when your imagination runs haywire, with no boundaries or limits.

Anxiety is when your chest is tight, your breathing shallow, and your head dizzy.

Anxiety is when your lungs speed up to a frenetic pace and your heart screams through your skin.

Anxiety is mental. It takes place in the realm of the mind.

What is depression?

Depression: noun.

1) Severe despondency and dejection, typically felt over a period of time and accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy.[\[2\]](#)

Another healthy feeling is sorrow. Grief. Lament. Pain. Suffering. These are not all bad emotions. They make us human. But when sorrow stretches out for long periods of time, you are dealing with depression.

Depression is when sorrow becomes a way of life, not a phase. When joy, hope, and life are snuffed out of your soul. When you are sad for no reason at all. When no matter how hard you try, fight, and work, you can't pull yourself out of a bad mood. When you wake up sad. When the day grows worse with each passing hour. When pleasure is like ash in your mouth. When family and friends are distant. When you are tired all the time. When dreams and desires for the future die and all motivation and energy is gone. When life is really, really horrible.

Depression is emotional. It infects and ruins the realm of the soul.

Why anxiety and depression?

Why is it that most people who deal with anxiety also deal with depression, and vice versa? In fact, doctors treat both problems with the same medication.

If you're stressed out and anxious—here's a pill.

If you're sad and depressed—here's the same pill.

Does that strike you as odd? One treatment for two separate issues?

Doctors are only now discovering what Solomon said thousands of years ago: “Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression.”[\[3\]](#) For a premodern, he was really quite brilliant.

Anxiety and depression are linked in a vicious, symbiotic web of co-dependency. The two are connected *because the mind and soul are connected*.

Solomon speaks of “anxiety in the heart of man.” Don't miss the gravity of what he's saying. The word *heart* is לב (leb), which means “inner part, thoughts, consciousness.”

Unlike the modern English word *heart*, the Hebrew word means your feelings *and your thinking*. To the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the seat of your thoughts. In today's language—the mind.

Ancient Hebrews called the heart, “the well.” It's the part of us—deep under the layers of topsoil—where the soul bleeds.

According to King Solomon, when there's anxiety in your mind—in your thoughts, in your imaginations, deep in your well—the result is depression in your emotions and feelings.

The point is this: How we think influences how we feel.

Make sure you catch that.

How you *think* (your thoughts, imaginations, mental patterns, etc.)...

influences (shapes/determines, etc.)...

how you *feel* (your emotions, feelings, mood, etc.).

That is why anxiety and depression are inseparable.

To quote my dad: “What’s down in the well comes up in the bucket.”^[4]

Like the king, he is a wise man.

^[1]That definition is from *Oxford American Dictionary*, straight off my MacBook.

^[2]From the same source.

^[3]Proverbs 12v25 from the New King Jimmy. The NIV says, “Anxiety weighs down the heart.” Same idea, but the NKJV actually uses the term *depression*.

^[4]Dad—this one goes out to you. Seriously, thanks for raising me in wisdom.

Cause and Effect(s)

Something is causing your depression.

I know it.

You know it.

In spite of the massive cultural push to reduce anxiety and depression down to pure medical issues, nothing more than improper levels of serotonin,[\[1\]](#) we all know emotional pain is not random.

Somewhere in your life, lurking in the shadows, is a sly monster preying on your soul.

I know that from experience, but I also know that from the scriptures.

Psalm 42

Psalm 42 is one of the most honest, raw, bare-knuckle prayers in the Bible.

David wrestles and argues and laments and questions and probes and hopes.

He opens his poem with vivid, graphic language about his thirst for God. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, *Where is your God?*”

David is starving for some taste of joy in God. We don’t know for sure what is going on in David’s life, but many scholars think Psalm 42 was written when David was pushed out of Jerusalem by a national insurrection.

David's sins are catching up with him. His own son is trying to murder him. Here he is, the king of Israel, and he's out hiding in the forest, separated from Jerusalem and the temple, grieving his hard circumstances.

He remembers past days when he was happy, "I remember...how I used to go with the multitude...leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng."

He wasn't always like this—sad, down, depressed. Which is why he asks the central, probing, brilliant question:

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."[\[2\]](#)

I would argue David's question is *the* question.

Why?

Why am I depressed?

What's causing the depression? What's making me stressed out, worried, nervous, unhappy, tired, miserable? What's up?

Disease or symptom?

There are two ways of viewing anxiety and depression.

Two ways of answering the question, *Why am I depressed?*

Two ways of dealing with the pain.

One is to think of depression as a disease. Something's wrong with the chemicals in your brain (whatever that means).[\[3\]](#) You are sick in your head and the disease is called *anxiety* or *depression*. This is how most people think and talk about depression.

I think it's wrong.

Another way to view depression is as a symptom. Something is wrong with your body, soul, spirit, brain, life, patterns, etc. *The result* is depression. Something in your life is *causing you* to be depressed.

If depression is a disease, you are a victim. Feel sorry for yourself. Question God. Shake your fist at the sky and ask him, “Why?” Pray for healing. Go to the doctor. Try every medication known to man. Pray for the right drug, the right prescription, the right diagnosis. Hope for the best.

But, if depression is a symptom, that changes everything. You are not a victim. If anything, you are the perpetrator of the crime. Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Don’t question God. Question yourself. Ask yourself David’s question, “Why are you downcast, O my soul?”

What’s making you depressed? What’s causing the misery? Dig. Probe. Go to counseling. Open up with friends and family. Fast. Pray. Ask God.

My thesis is simple. Depression is a symptom, not a disease. Something, somewhere, deep inside your life, is *causing* the depression. The journey toward healing starts with asking the question, “Why so downcast, O my soul?”

What is causing the pain?

Surgery

If you want to fight off anxiety and depression in your soul, you have to start digging. You have to get underneath the skin and do surgery. What’s below the epidermis? What’s down deep? What’s causing the depression?

I know it’s not easy. You’re hurting and you’re vulnerable. The last thing you want is to dig or probe or question yourself. You already feel beat up and defeated. I get that. But trust me. The result is far better than the reality you are living today.

Think of your body. If your leg is broken, take all the pain medication you want. Aspirin. Vicodin. Anything. But it’s not going to fix your leg, only dull

the pain.

If you want to walk again, you need to open up your leg, do surgery, and fix what's broken on the inside. You need to take drastic measures and push through real pain. Then, after a time of waiting and healing, you'll walk like new.

People ask me all the time, “Do you think taking anti-depressants is wrong?”

No. Absolutely not. If it helps the pain, okay. But you're asking the wrong question. The right question is, “What's causing the pain in my soul?”

Keep in mind, anti-depressants don't make you happy. Drugs like Paxil® and Prozac® and Zoloft® numb your emotions. They dull the searing internal pain of anxiety and depression. Medication helps balance out your emotions, and that is a gift. *But* it does not make you happy.

Now, I don't know about you, but I want more than *not miserable*. I want joy and peace and life! To live awake and alive to God and his presence all around me. To live in tune and in harmony with the Spirit of God. To “be joyful always.”[\[4\]](#) Anti-depressants are no help to me. I'm chasing down joy.

Plus, anti-depressants don't work very well.

Several recent studies throughout the world of psychiatry have found that virtually all anti-depressant drugs on the market today have low—if any—impact on depression symptoms. Long-term effectiveness is shoddy and side effects are many. And as more drugs come on the market, the options don't get any better. A recent study by the *British Journal of Psychiatry* concluded that “newer anti-depressant drugs are equivalent to or no better than placebos.”[\[5\]](#)

At some point the medication wears off, the drugs stop working, and you are back to square one. You have to deal with the roots—the source. What's causing the pain?

Depression can be a good thing

Here's what you have to understand: depression is not always bad. Remember, God built us as emotional creatures. We feel. And not all unpleasant feelings are bad. Depression can be a natural, normal, God-fabricated emotional response to unhealthy stimuli.

If you are sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend, depression is a natural, human, God-given emotional response to sin. It is God's way of saying, "Stop! What are you thinking? You are ruining your life, stealing from your future, robbing from your joy. Knock it off!"

If you are dealing with the death of a loved one, depression is a natural, normal, human response to tragedy. It's okay to grieve. It's okay to feel deeply, process, lament, and release the pain of losing somebody you love.

If you are working 90 hours a week, ignoring your family and friends, and neglecting your walk with God, depression is a gift from God. Your soul is built to scream at you when necessary. Slow down! Take a breath. Value people over things, relationships over accomplishments. Sabbath. Take one day out of seven to be, not to do.

Pain can be a gift. Pain exists to guard us from permanent damage. When your knee hurts and you're limping around, pain is a gift to keep you off your feet, allow your leg to heal, and guard you from doing long-term damage.

Depression is emotional pain.

Depression, like pain, can be a gift. Doctors tell us to listen to our bodies. The same is true of our souls. Slow down. Stop. Listen. Maybe God is telling you that something is not right. Some piece of your soul is out of rhythm, out of sync with God's Spirit. Somewhere you got off track and are not living the way of Jesus.

It's time to do surgery. Time to get down to the source of your pain. But first you have to diagnose the root causes.

[1]Serotonin (also called 5-Hydroxytryptamine) is the name of a hormone your body naturally produces. Most people think it's a chemical in the brain. Actually, serotonin is primarily found in your gut. Many doctors think depression is caused by low levels of serotonin. The problem with that theory is there is no possible way to measure serotonin levels. The science of anxiety and depression remains elusive and incomplete.

[2]He asks the question *three* times: Psalm 42v5+11 and again in Psalm 43v5. Most scholars think the two Psalms were originally one. In the Bible, repetition equals emphasis. The psalmist is driving his point home.

[3]I am in *no way* trying to make light of serious medical research and work being done in the fields of anxiety and depression. I just think there are way too many people running around with no clue what they are actually saying.

[4]One way to translate 1 Thessalonians 5v16. Also, "Rejoice always..."

[5]Fascinating study published by *The British Journal of Psychiatry* in 2009 titled "Antidepressants on trial: how valid is the evidence?"

MOVEMENT TWO

Digging up the roots (sin)

There's a plant in my backyard that I just cannot kill. Every fall I yank it out of the ground, and every spring it returns. Somewhere down there, under who-knows-how-many inches of muddy, Portland soil, are the roots. The only way to end the plant's annoying, indestructible existence is to get down to the roots, and dig 'em up.

The problem is, I hate yard work. I mean I *hate* yard work. I'm a city boy through and through. Shovels and gloves? Anathema.

That's why the plant keeps coming back. I don't want to actually deal with the problem—the roots. But I can only procrastinate for so long. At some point I need to get my hands dirty.

The same is true with anxiety and depression. If you want to be whole again—if you want to end anxiety and eradicate depression—you have to dig up the roots.

No more procrastinating. No more making excuses. The time has come to get dirt under your fingernails. It's time to get down on your hands and knees and figure out what's causing your depression. Once you figure that out, you're on the right track.

I know it's hard.

I know it's scary to look under the surface, because who knows what's down there.

I get that. Trust me. But you can't bury the pain. It will *not* go away. As scared as you may be, you have to step out into the waters and trust that Jesus will lead you through.

It's time to get down to the roots...

Here's a laundry list of causes (roots) from my own life and countless conversations with others who fight anxiety and depression.

I break the conversation down into two elastic categories: sins and struggles. By sins, I mean blatant, clear areas of disobedience to God and the teachings of the Bible. Struggles I define as patterns built into people's DNA or subconscious that are more of a weakness of personality, than an act of disobedience.[\[1\]](#)

Sins

First let's take a look at sins many of us fight on a regular basis.

Please know this list is not designed to make you feel guilty, but rather to expose the broken places in your soul, what's causing the depression, and to help you climb into a position of repentance.

Bitterness

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus prays, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."[\[2\]](#)

Jesus takes forgiveness really, really seriously.

He forgives murderers and thieves and adulterers and narcissists, and he asks his followers to do the same.

Hanging on the cross, stripped naked, bleeding and dying, Jesus looks at the Romans executing him and says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."[\[3\]](#)

Shocking, provocative grace. And Jesus asks us to turn around and show

others the same grace. People who hurt us, wound us, abuse us, persecute us, betray us.

Father, forgive them...

But you have no idea the pain they caused! The scars they inflicted!

Father, forgive them...

But I want justice! I want vindication! I want them to suffer like me!

Father, forgive them.

There are no loopholes. Jesus calls his followers to forgive people who hurt, wound, and betray us. Period. But it's really hard to forgive.

Yet when we disobey Jesus, the results are infectious. Unforgiveness leads to bitterness. Bitterness leads to anger, hurt, shame. Memories start to haunt you, control you, and take over your soul like an ominous dark cloud suffocating the light. Sound familiar?

My wife and I are close friends with a woman who just went through a divorce. Her husband was horrible. Unfaithful. Cruel. Nonstop lies and deceit.

Her wounds run deep.

And she refuses to forgive him. And we're watching her *change*. Bitterness is contorting her, twisting her into a parody of her former self. Because of her thirst for justice, she refuses to release.

The author of Hebrews says, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone...see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." [\[4\]](#)

Bitterness is like an infectious weed. It grows up in the hearts and minds of people who have been hurt and wronged. At first we don't see it. Yet, like a weed, it starts to cause trouble. It chokes out life, love, joy, peace, and health just like a weed strangles flowers in the garden.

It takes over. It spreads. And it defiles *many*.

I honestly think one of the most common causes of depression is bitterness. When I am in counseling sessions with people fighting anxiety and depression, it's really, really rare for bitterness not to be a factor. It's almost always a factor. Most of the time it's related to family. Abuse. Neglect. Divorce. Unhealthy, unloving parents. When left unchecked, bitterness creeps in and tears souls apart. At first it feels like armor. Like it's protecting you, shielding you. It feels like a comfort. I know from experience. But then it turns on you. Your armor becomes your prison.

We need to forgive. Jesus *commands* us to forgive. It's not an option for Jesus followers. "If you do not forgive...your Father will not forgive your sins."[\[5\]](#) Plain and simple.

Who has hurt you? Who has wronged you? Have you forgiven them? Really, honestly forgiven them?

Or do they still hold a power over you?

Do they still control your joy?

Let go of your anger. Let go of your hurt.

It's like a weed.

Rip it out. Dig it up by the roots.

I know that is really, *really* hard. I am well aware the above words are the tip of the proverbial iceberg. There's a ton more under the surface that people need to work through. I get that. But my point is—you need to forgive.

Wipe the slate clean. Move on. Start fresh.

I've heard it said, "Forgiveness is setting somebody free, and then realizing that somebody is you."[\[6\]](#)

Sexual immorality

Lots of people think the rampant sexuality dripping off of billboards and magazine racks and TV commercials is a modern phenomenon, but it's not. It's an ancient, primal problem for humans.

In the first century AD, a man named Paul wrote a letter to the church in the city of Corinth. One of the many problems he untangles in the letter is a kinky one: believers are having sex with temple prostitutes. Corinth was home to the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexuality, beauty, and fertility. Strabo, an ancient Greek historian, claims there were a thousand sex slaves around her temple.^[7] For obvious reasons, she was an extremely popular goddess. Depravity and deviancy were built into Corinth's culture, and the Jesus followers were getting sucked into Corinth's sins. Which is why Paul says:

“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins people commit are outside their bodies, but those who sin sexually sin against their own bodies. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, who you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”^[8]

Notice Paul says, “*Flee* from sexual immorality.” He does not tell us to fight it. The text can be translated, “Run for your lives!” Sexual immorality corrupts us from the inside out. We were built to be temples for the Living God. Immorality defiles and defaces God's temple, pushing his presence out.

We live in a world much like Corinth. Aphrodite is alive and well. She lives on in the modern temples of entertainment, from strip clubs to websites to movies to kids messing around in the back of a car. She is as demonic and dangerous as she was in Paul's day.

The word Paul uses for sexual immorality is **πορνεία** (*porneia*) and is where we get the English word *pornography*. Here are the recent stats:

- 43% of all Internet users regularly view pornographic material: 72% are male, 28% are female.

- Americans spend \$13.6 billion on the porn industry every year.
 - The average age of first exposure is 11 years old.
 - 15-17 year olds who have had multiple exposures to online porn: 80%.
 - Christian men who have viewed porn in the last week: 53%.
 - Christian families who say porn is a major problem in their home: 47%.[\[9\]](#)

Staggering statistics. Pornography is the elephant in the room. The sin nobody likes to talk about. It is ripping lives apart at the seams. And it is impossible to download porn and live a healthy, happy life.

You can have *porneia*, and you can have joy and peace. But you cannot have both.

It's impossible to sleep with your girlfriend or boyfriend and be happy at the same time. You're lying to yourself if you think it's possible.

Make up your mind. Worship Aphrodite or worship Jesus.

Now, sexual immorality is a complex, multifaceted conversation we don't have time to get into. Entire books are written on that one subject alone.[\[10\]](#) But for the point we are making, sexual immorality, and in particular pornography, is one of the primary causes of depression around the world.

Millions of people are neck deep in porn and sexual immorality, and it murders the life that is *truly life*.

If you are one of the statistics, get help. Repent. Open up. Join a group of men or women fighting for purity and release.

In the words of Paul: flee sexual immorality.

Worry

I know I already talked about anxiety and depression, and how these two struggles, plaguing millions of people, are *symptoms*, not *diseases*. Anxiety and depression are caused by something else.

But here's where it gets confusing. Anxiety is both a verb and a noun. To be anxious is an act and a state of being.

To clear things up a bit, let us use two different words. Let's say *worry* is the act and *anxiety* is the state of being.

Worry is when you freak out, abdicate mental self-control, and plunge into the endless, repetitive cycle of what-ifs and fears about tomorrow.

Worry is sin.

And the results are catastrophic for the soul. Worry leads to anxiety, the state of being where fear, nerves, pounding pulse rates, and tight breathing in your chest become a permanent, fixed lifestyle. For some of us, anxiety is part of our identity. Who wants to live like that?

As usual, Jesus shows us a better way.

He says, "Do not worry about your life." [\[11\]](#)

Period.

He makes this crazy, blunt statement right in the middle of his talk on the hill, also known as the Sermon on the Mount. The talk, written down in Matthew 5-7, is Jesus' manifesto for his kingdom of God. On those pages, Jesus shows us life as God intended. The way we were built to function, breathe, and move through the universe.

God built us to walk in peace, not anxiety, which means he calls us to trust, not worry.

Anxiety is temporary atheism.

Anxiety is when you stop trusting God, stop believing there is a God who is real, aware, loving, involved, and able to do *anything* in your life. When you

worry, you suspend faith—you stop believing in what is true.

Jesus goes on to say, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or stow away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

When was the last time you met a stressed-out sparrow? Or a dove on meds?

Jesus calls us to learn from the birds. To learn a way of living in which we default to trust, not worry.

Next he says, “Do not worry, saying, *What shall we eat?* or *What shall we drink?* or *What shall we wear?* For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”[\[12\]](#)

Jesus points out something profound...

Anxiety exposes idolatry.

We worry about what we worship. We worry about the things we are passionate about, the things we center ourselves around.

If you are worried about money—paying the bills, making the promotion, closing the deal, buying the house—maybe money is your god.

If you are worried about what people think of you—gossip, whisperers, fashion, image, conversations where you second-guess your words—it could be your reputation is your god. The fear of man is what drives you. You are more concerned with what people think of you, than with what God thinks of you.

If you are worried about your kids—grades, performance, schools, teacher’s reviews—maybe you have turned your family into an idol.

This is why Jesus harps on worry as sin. He is always calling us back to true worship. To make God the center. To seek first Jesus and his kingdom.

Worry can be a gift because it shows us what we are really passionate about. It exposes idolatry in all its various forms. And Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom. Meaning we should put our hearts' passions into the kingdom, not the fleeting, temporary things that we spend so much time worrying about.

“*Therefore*, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”[\[13\]](#)

I hear laughter in Jesus' tone of voice.

Almost everybody worries about tomorrow. About the what-ifs and all the different scenarios where life could run amuck. Jesus calls us to step away from those worries—those idols—and trust him as Father and provider.

Laziness

The book of Proverbs is an ancient Jewish wisdom book, filled with aphorisms about life in God's world. Proverbs has lots to say about an archetype called *the sluggard*.

“How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.” (6v9-11)

“The craving of sluggards will be the death of them, because their hands refuse to work.” (21v25)

“As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on the bed. Sluggards bury their hands in the dish and are too lazy to bring them back to their mouths.” (26v14-15)

The real problem with sluggards is laziness. No drive. No goals. No vision. No ambition to work and sweat and labor for something beyond their own hedonistic pleasures.

I think it's interesting that most of Proverbs was written during the reign of

King Solomon, when Israel was at its economic zenith. The kingdom was dripping with money. Trade, commerce, import, export, building projects, infrastructure, and resources for science, medicine, academics, the arts—the prosperity of Solomon’s empire was unparalleled.

Empires always produce sluggards. Where there is extra cash, there will always be people who live off the sweat of others.

We live in one of the wealthiest empires in human history. And laziness is a growing problem, especially in men. I know more lazy men than women, which seems strange to me. And laziness produces weird, unhealthy emotions in a man. It robs us of joy. Why? Because we were created to work!

Many people think work is part of the curse. It’s not. Go back and read the first three chapters of Genesis. God put man in the Garden of Eden “to *work it* and take care of it.”[\[14\]](#) God built humans, especially men, to work—and to work with joy! Work is not part of the curse. Later on in the story, God curses *the ground* with thorns. “Through painful toil you will eat of it.” Now, because of the curse, work is hard and laborious. But work itself is not bad. Work is a gift. Most people work to live.

The Bible teaches that we live to work.

God created us to live for something larger than ourselves—to live for something beyond the hedonistic pleasures of the weekend. To make our lives matter. To contribute to the world God made. To *work* and *take care* of the creation all around us.

When we forget this purpose, we get lazy. And when we get lazy, we get depressed, because we are living for ourselves, and not for the mission of God.

Humans need a mission. Vision. Goals. Plans. Something on the horizon for which we can work, sweat, and pray.

Do you have a mission? Vision for your life? Plans for your career? Are you working hard?

Are you an Adam? Or a sluggard?

Unconfessed, habitual sin

King David is a well-known man in the Bible. His life is the story of great exploits and tragic failures. He makes some really huge blunders toward the end of his life. Adultery. Murder. And in the end, he repents—though not right away. At first he hides. Lies. Covers up his sins. In Psalm 32 he speaks of his unconfessed sin:

“When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. *Selah*. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, *I will confess my transgressions to the LORD*—and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found...”[\[15\]](#)

Really graphic, lurid language: “My bones wasted away...” Interesting, because doctors say achy bones are a symptom of depression.

“My strength was sapped...” Also interesting, because low energy levels are another medical symptom of depression.

Could it be these physical symptoms of pain and exhaustion are the result of what’s going on deep inside the soul? In David’s case, hidden sin was sapping his energy and leaking out of his body in aches and pains.

The human soul was not designed to bear the crushing load of guilt. Unconfessed, habitual sin suffocates the soul’s life and sucks our energy right out. God built us to live in transparency and vulnerability, not in hiding.

One-time sins are bad enough. Blunders, mistakes, and failures result in all kinds of pain. But ongoing hidden sin is a thousand times worse. It numbs us. Slowly, but surely, your body adapts to the pain. It creates calluses around the soul. You stop feeling God—feeling the Spirit’s conviction. You stop feeling alive.

Prayer becomes fake. The Bible becomes wooden and tasteless. Heaven feels a million miles away. These are the results of hidden sin.

After David is confronted, he *confesses*. He prays,

“Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your unfailing love;

according to your great compassion

blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”[\[16\]](#)

And he goes on to say,

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation...”[\[17\]](#)

He confesses to God, and to Nathan the prophet, and it leads to joy.[\[18\]](#)

The habitual, regular, rhythmic practice of confession is key to the life of the soul. Confession starts with God. You open up in prayer. You are honest. You admit you have a problem. You ask for forgiveness. You repent, turn away, ask for help, and move on.

David had a son named Solomon. Years later the King’s son writes, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”[\[19\]](#)

But often confession to God is not enough. God wants more out of us. We need to take it to the next level and confess to others.

James says, “Confess your sins *to each other* and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”[\[20\]](#)

Something powerful and liberating happens when we open up with brothers and sisters in Jesus and confess sin. Freedom. New life. Healing. God blesses the confessor’s humility and honesty, and answers the “other’s” prayer. And

our brothers and sisters in Jesus become emissaries of God's grace and forgiveness, confirming the scriptures' claim that we are right with God by repentance and faith. They help us step back into joy.

Confession and prayer are far more effective than Aspirin and caffeine in dealing with achy bones, tired bodies, and guilty souls.

Abuse

So far we are dealing with sins where you are responsible. I know what I'm saying is hard to swallow, but in a blame-happy culture, we need to own up to our sins. The victim mentality puts us on the road to anger, bitterness, and unforgiveness, rather than responsibility and repentance.

With that said, there are sins in which you are the victim.

Planet earth is a dangerous place to be.

The Satan is leading a violent rebellion. The collateral damage of his malevolent war against God is catastrophic. Many are the victims of evil.

Abuse.

Rape.

Neglect.

Betrayal.

Adultery.

Slander.

Just typing the words pains my chest.

I'm a pastor. That means I have a front row seat to watch pain play out in people's lives. My wife and I have sat with countless victims who have suffered the horrors of evil.

The other day we prayed with a young, beautiful woman who was recently pulled into the bushes on her way home from a night class and gang raped by strangers.

Can you imagine living with those memories—those nightmares? *Of course* the result is going to be depression.

There's a young man in our church who has been married for one year. He just found out his wife is leaving him...for another woman.

Can you imagine the betrayal—the rejection? The stigma of divorce forever marking you in people's eyes. *Of course* the result is going to be depression.

There's a woman in our church who is eight months pregnant—with a baby who died two months ago.

Do you think she's *happy* right now? Chipper? Of course not! She's facing evil head on.

Words fail to express my solidarity with you. I am so, so sorry for your pain.

I have no simplistic formulas for you. But I do have a few thoughts...

Here's the stark reality: one of the primary causes of depression *is* sin, but it's not always *your* sin.

That's why the gospel is *good news*. Jesus promises to forgive and punish sin. All sin.

For the repentant, sin was punished on the cross.

You

are

forgiven.

But for the unrepentant, sin *will be punished* when Jesus returns and judges humanity.

Either way, justice will be done.

But the gospel is more than justice. The gospel is also mercy.

The gospel is about the God who goes after broken people.

The scriptures make an audacious claim: “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”[\[21\]](#)

In *all* things...

In abuse? In betrayal? God is *there*? Yes!

Please *do not misunderstand me*. That does not mean your pain is God’s will or part of his plan. God’s will is good. God *hates* evil. But God is there, in the darkest parts of your story, doing the work of redemption.

Only Jesus has the ability to turn evil into good. Only he can take evil, demonic, horrific experiences and thread them into his cosmic plan of redemption.

Can God turn my evil into good? Yes.

Open up your life to God. Love God. Live according to his purpose. Lean into redemption. And keep your eyes on the horizon. God will work for the good in your story.

[\[1\]](#)The “two categories” analogy is a bit dangerous. Really, it’s more of a spectrum. You can plot various sins and struggles somewhere along a line. Outright sins and rebellion would tend toward one end while automated, subconscious personality traits would tend toward the other.

[2]Matthew 6v9-14. Pray that prayer every day and you will do well.

[3]Luke 23v34.

[4]Hebrews 12v14-15. Notice the language. “Bitter root grows up...” Same analogy. Underneath the surface something is seething and causing problems up above.

[5]Matthew 6v15.

[6]I’m not sure of the origin of the quote. I have heard it attributed to Corrie ten Boom after her years in a Nazi concentration camp.

[7]From *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* by William Smith.

[8]1 Corinthians 6v18-20.

[9]Stats are from xxxchurch.com.

[10]The church I’m a part of uses the book *Pure Desire* by Ted Roberts.

[11]Matthew 6v25. Part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

[12]Matthew 6v26-33.

[13]Matthew 6v34.

[14]Genesis 2v15.

[15]Psalm 32v3-5.

[16]Psalm 51v1-2.

[17]Psalm 51v12.

[18]That part of the story is found in 2 Samuel 12.

Really interesting read.

[[19](#)]Proverbs 28v13. I wonder if he was thinking of his father when he penned those words. After all, his older brother died as a result of that affair

[[20](#)]James 5v16. Our church uses this all the time.

[[21](#)]Romans 8v28.

Dirt under your fingernails (struggles)

Sins are blatant, clear acts of disobedience. Struggles—on the other hand—are patterns built into your DNA. They are more of a bent, or propensity, or weakness of personality.

Sins are clear. Black and white. You know what's right, and you know what's wrong. You simply need to stop.

But struggles are nebulous. Harder to pick out and easy to miss.

Think of sins like the plant in my backyard. Think of struggles like weeds. Smaller. But infectious. The only way to get rid of weeds is to get dirt under your fingernails.

Let's unpack common struggles that lead to anxiety and depression.

Perfectionism

Perfectionists.

You know who you are. And you know what's wrong with everything and everyone. Nothing is good enough. Nobody measures up. Especially not yourself.

I know, because I'm one of them.

A while back the staff at my church took the Myers-Briggs personality test. I work with my best friends and a really great crew of pastors. Most of the guys are hyper-relational, outgoing personality types. At the end of the test, you are given a one-sentence summation of your personality type.

One of the outcomes was, “You only go around once in life!”

Another’s said, “Giving life an extra squeeze!”

Do you know what mine said?

“Everything has room for improvement.”

Thank you very much.

The problem is, when all you see is what’s wrong—what needs improvement—you end up really unhappy and twisted because, well, *everything* has room for improvement.

The brilliant Dallas Willard says, “And then there are the pure in heart, the ones for whom nothing is good enough, not even themselves...these are the perfectionists. They are a pain to everyone, themselves most of all. In religion they will certainly find errors in your doctrine, your practice, and probably your heart and your attitude. They may be even harder on themselves. They endlessly pick over their own motivations...Their food is never cooked right; their clothes and hair are always unsatisfactory; they can tell you what is wrong with everything. How miserable they are!”[\[1\]](#)

Perfectionism is a recipe for misery. We are broken people living in a broken world. It is written, “All have sinned [past tense] and *fall short* [present tense] of the glory of God.” Meaning: nobody’s perfect! Don’t look for heaven on earth. It’s not here. We live in a fallen, broken, warped world.

Perfectionists, like myself, need to wake up and realize life is messy. Stop critiquing. Stop picking everything apart. Stop analyzing.

Life is not perfect. End of story.

Introspection

The word *introspective* comes from two Latin words: *specere* meaning “to look or to scope out,” and *intro* meaning “inward or inside.” To be

introspective is literally to look inside yourself.

In small doses, introspection is healthy. David prays, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”[\[2\]](#)

In another place he prays, “May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”[\[3\]](#)

It’s right and good to “look inside” on a regular basis, probing for sin, exposing ungodly motivations, thoughts, meditations, and cravings.

But a wise man once said, “Weakness is strength in excess.”[\[4\]](#) Sometimes healthy introspection evolves into a way of seeing the world that is focused on the self. You don’t have to be a nuclear physicist to figure out that people who are focused on themselves tend to be depressed. If you look inside, you are going to find depressing things! You are bound to find flaws and holes in your heart.

It is written, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”[\[5\]](#) We are broken people. Yes, God is healing us from the inside out, but we are a work in progress. We are messy. Start digging in the mud and you are going to get dirty. Start peering inside yourself, and you will become depressed. It’s inevitable.

And introspection often slips into narcissism.

Narcissism

Narcissists are people with an inordinate obsession with themselves.

Sometimes it shows up as introspection, self-pity, and insecurity, but not always. Other times it manifests itself as vanity, self-love, and megalomania. Both are twisted forms of a self-focused worldview.

The word *narcissism* comes from an ancient Greek myth about a man named

Narcissus who was in love with himself. He was the most beautiful man on earth. The gods warned him to never look in a mirror, but one day, as he walked through the woods, he passed by a placid, tranquil spring. Peering down for a drink of water, he spotted his own reflection. He was mesmerized by his beauty and could not pry his eyes away from the water. He sat there for days, kissing his own reflection. As punishment, the gods killed him and turned him into a flower to grow in his place by the spring.[\[6\]](#)

How many of us are like Narcissus and in love with ourselves?

It's why most groups of friends are homogenous. We hang out with people who dress like us, act like us, vote like us, listen to the same music as us, etc. Why? Because we are in love with ourselves! We love people who remind us of ourselves.

Narcissism is self-love, and it shows up as self-focused living. We only think about ourselves.

Our plans. Our desires. Our money.

Me. Me. Me.

And it leads to misery.

In place of narcissism, the scriptures teach us that humility is the way of God. Paul says, "Make my joy complete...do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."[\[7\]](#)

Don't misunderstand humility. Humility is not thinking low of yourself. (*I'm a nobody. I'm horrible.*) No, that's a twisted form of introspection and narcissism. Humility is *not thinking of yourself at all*. The humble person is lost in the needs of others. And when you are focused on the needs of others, there's no time to think about yourself, good or bad. And the result is joy! Paul says the way to make his joy complete is by living others-focused (as opposed to self-focused), humble lives.

Stop staring at your face in the mirror. You will end up depressed. Get lost in

the needs of people around you.

Guilt

It's always there.

Like a monster under the bed.

You turn on the lights and it's nowhere to be found, but you know it's there. Somewhere. Lurking. Stalking you.

You close your eyes and bury your head under the covers, but it won't go away. It's inches away from your face, breathing down your neck.

Okay, maybe I was a kid with a vivid imagination, but I don't think I'm alone. We all make mistakes. There are skeletons in all our closets. We all live with the bitter memories of something that happened in the past. For many of us, guilt stalks us for years of our lives. We cannot forget what we did a year ago, two years ago, twenty years ago...

The abortion...

The lie...

The affair...

The memory haunts us, stomping out any hope of joy.

That is no way to live at all. That is not what Jesus wants for his followers. Remember what he said? "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, *your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*" [\[8\]](#)

The other day I was reading the Gospel of Mark. I love the story where four guys tear open the ceiling of a house where Jesus is teaching, and lower a lame man right in front of Jesus. Can you imagine sitting there, in the middle of Jesus' talk, and being hit by clods of dirt and mud falling from above? Crazy.

But what strikes me every time I read the story is how Jesus looks at the paralyzed man lying in front of him, and says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”[\[9\]](#)

You would think Jesus would open with, “Get up, take your mat, and go home.” But it’s the other way around.

Could it be the greatest human need is forgiveness?

Guilt is just as crippling and immobilizing as a broken spinal column.

We need to be right with God. We need grace. We need a clean slate. We need the cross of Jesus.

But forgiveness is something that has to be received. By received I don’t mean you need to pray a prayer. You need to repent and turn away from your sin. Confess. Share your sin with God and with brothers and sisters in Jesus. Get it out in the open. No more secrets. If you don’t do that, guilt will chase you forever.

But then you need to hear,

absorb,

believe,

own,

take hold of,

and trust.

In what? In the cross.

The cross wipes the slate clean.

The cross covers.

The cross builds a coffin and buries your sin six feet under the ground.

Romans 5 says, “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”[\[10\]](#)

Do you believe that?

Grace is a past event. *We have been justified. We have peace with God. We have gained access.* But it’s also something you have to stand in. You have to believe and trust and stand in the work of Jesus on the cross.

Lay down the shackles of guilt and shame. Walk in freedom and new life. Believe in grace.

Life in the here and now

The only thing that is real is the present. Right here. Right now. The past is a memory. The future is a shot in the dark. The moment is where we live.[\[11\]](#)

The problem is many of us spend more time in the past or the future than the present. And it robs us of joy in the moment.

Don’t get me wrong; it’s good to look back and remember, to think about God’s faithfulness and the story of your life, and to learn from your mistakes. I spend lots of time reading old journal entries and thinking about God’s grace in my life. And it’s healthy to look forward and make plans, to seek God for vision for your future. God is a planner, and we should be too. But we live in the present. We need to be fully aware and fully awake in the moment.

Too much time spent in the past leads to depression: regrets, bad memories, shame, guilt, bitterness, old wounds—all that lies in the past.

Too much time spent in the future leads to anxiety: what if *that* happens? What if this falls through? Fear. Worry. Concern. It’s all in the future. I have learned 95% of the things I worry about are connected to the future, and 90% of the things I worry about never even happen. I expend hours of mental energy thinking about scary scenarios that never materialize.

That's why Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."[\[12\]](#) Almost all our worries and fears are about the future.

And what does he say next? "Each day has enough trouble of its own."[\[13\]](#) I laugh under my breath every time I read that line. He's right, as always. We have enough to deal with today. And most of the time, the troubles of the day are doable. Hard at times. Stressful, but doable.

There is no intelligent or productive point to guilt about the past or worry about the future.

But what about eschatology in the Bible—hope for the second coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God, and the new heavens and the new earth? Yes, the entire Bible is eschatological, pointing forward to the renewal of all things. And yes, we are to have hope. We live *for* the future, but we live *in* the present. Our eyes are on the horizon, but our feet are squarely planted on the ground.

Look down at your phone or watch. What's the date? Time?

Live there.

Sabbath

God built us to work and to play.

Sweat and sleep.

When God made the world, after six days of intense, universe-sculpting work, he stepped back to take a breath.

It is written: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."[\[14\]](#)

God rested.

I repeat, *God* rested.

And in doing so he built a day of rest into the rhythm of creation. For six days we work and sweat and labor, but on the seventh day, like God, we rest. We pause. We breathe. We take a day to be, not to do.[\[15\]](#)

We rest, because we were created for the Garden.

We rest to remind ourselves the world goes on without us. We are not as important as we think. We live in a story, and we are not the main character.

We rest because God rests.

But when we don't rest, when we fight the natural rhythms built into us by God, we reap the consequences.

Fatigue. Exhaustion. Stress. Worn-out bodies. Worn-down souls. Tired minds. Busy lives. Starved relationships. These are the results of life without rest.

And when these habits creep into life patterns, the results can be anxiety and depression.

Fatigue makes a bad problem *feel* worse. Stress exasperates already tense issues. Exhaustion colors everything gray. Tiredness overloads the soul.

We need to Sabbath. We need to rest. We need to stop and breathe and sleep and play and talk and go on a walk when the wind is soft and the sun is winding down.

I have learned when I'm depressed that sometimes I need to pray and fast, but other times I simply need to go to bed.

Life always looks better in the morning.

Sometimes I really need a good day off. To recoup. To catch my wind. To refuel my insides.

A wise man once said, "The Sabbath was made for man..."[\[16\]](#)

Ingratitude...and her nasty companion self-pity

Humanistic propaganda screams at us everywhere we go. “You deserve better.” “There’s no one like you.” “Stand up for yourself.” And after a while we start believing the mantra.

The most influential culture-shaping document in American history is the Declaration of Independence. And built into the ethos of American society are three inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I think the wording is ironic: *the pursuit* of happiness. It’s almost like the architects of modern democracy said, “We guarantee you life, and we promise you liberty. But happiness? Good luck.”

America is a social experiment founded on the pursuit of happiness. Hundreds of millions of Americans are chasing down happiness. Money, materialism, sex, romance, religion, family, and fame are all pursuits of the same human craving—joy. But apart from Jesus, we never get there. People spend decades searching high and low for happiness and never land at joy. In an odd twist of fate, America, for all her *life and liberty*, is one of the most depressed nations in the world. And many of us are mad at God.

Somehow we think God owes us. We deserve happiness. We deserve a good, comfortable life, free from pain and suffering. We have rights! Right?

The scriptures present a totally different worldview that stands against the humanism of Western Europe. It is written, “By grace you have been saved.”[\[17\]](#)

The word *grace* is **χάρις** (*charis*) in the Greek, which can be translated as “gift.”

All of life is grace.

All of life is a gift.

Humans have no rights. *Everything* is a gift. Food, shelter, the clothes on our backs, the oxygen in our lungs—it’s all grace. The entire planet, the sky above us and the ground beneath our feet, is all on loan from the Creator

God. We live under his roof, eat his food, and drink his water. We are guests. And we are blessed.

A reporter once asked Bob Dylan if he was happy. Dylan's response was, "These are yuppie words, happiness and unhappiness. It's not happiness or unhappiness. It's either blessed or unblessed."[\[18\]](#)

I like that.

We are blessed.

When you reorient yourself to a biblical worldview, the only posture left to take is gratitude. If all of life is a gift, how could we help but thank God?

There are entire Psalms with no purpose other than thanksgiving. No requests, no prayers, simply gratitude.

Psalm 107 says, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever."

The Psalmist goes on to say *give thanks* five more times—in one Psalm! He is driving the point home: we need to live from a posture of gratitude for the love of God.

The opposite of gratitude is entitlement, thinking God owes you. There's a humanist in all of us who thinks we are good, we have rights, and God is lucky to have us.

And when we don't get what we want, we slip into self-pity. The woe-is-me, my-life-sucks, I-deserve-better, Eeyore mentality.

If I asked you to sit down and write a list of ten problems in your life, and then write another list of ten blessings in your life, which list would be easier to write? For most of us, it's the list of problems. That is entitlement and self-pity.

Listen, God is not a cosmic vending machine who is at your beck and call. He is the Creator of the universe. He owes you nothing. Everything you have is on loan from God. Rather than moaning about what you don't have, be

thankful for what you do have!

Do you have money in your pockets? Even five dollars of spare change?
Over three billion people live on less than two dollars a day.[\[19\]](#)

Do you have clean drinking water? Nearly one billion people on the planet
today do not have access to clean, safe drinking water.[\[20\]](#)

Are you alive? With food in your stomach? (That's a rhetorical question.)
More than thirty thousand children die every day from hunger and
malnutrition.[\[21\]](#)

Are you reading the words in front of you? One out of every five humans is
illiterate.[\[22\]](#)

Gratitude is all about perspective. We are *blessed*. Never forget that. Never
stop thanking God for grace.

We all have different struggles, but we all struggle. I actually think struggles
are much harder to deal with than sins. But limping along half-healed is no
good. You need to go all the way. That's the next step.

[\[1\]](#)Pg. 118 of *The Divine Conspiracy*.

[2]Psalm 139v23-24.

[3]Psalm 19v14.

[4]I first heard that phrase from my friend and counselor, Bill Keyes. Bill, thanks for the wisdom. I owe you.

[5]Jeremiah 17v9.

[6]Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, 3.370.

[7]Philippians 2v2-4.

[8]Matthew 6v15.

[9]Mark 2v1-12.

[10]Romans 5v1-2.

[11]If you want more on that idea, pick up *Present Perfect: Finding God in the Now* by Greg Boyd. It's a short, meditative read, expanding the same idea.

[12]Matthew 6v34.

[13]Matthew 6v34.

[14]Genesis 2v2.

[15]The idea of Sabbath just about saved my life a few years back. I read *The Sabbath* by the genius Abraham Joshua Heschel. Mind-bending work. I strongly encourage you to give it a read. The Sabbath is a lost art in the modern church.

[16]Mark 2v27.

[17]Ephesians 2v8.

[18]A 1991 interview by *Rolling Stone* magazine in honor of Dylan's 50th birthday.

[[19](#)]www.worldbank.org.

[[20](#)]Stats taken from www.unicef.com. You can also find mind-numbing stats on this topic at www.charitywater.org.

[[21](#)]www.unicef.com.

[[22](#)]www.unicef.com.

The art of repentance

Something is *causing* your depression. Deep in your soul, something is out of whack and needs to be set right. We start by diagnosing the causes with the help of the scriptures, the Spirit, friends, family, counselors, and doctors. From there, it's simple. We repent.

Healing starts with repentance.

Now, pay attention. It would be really easy to get off track right here; to slip into some sadistic, self-deprecating mantra of guilt, shame, defeat, and then, depression.

Do not misunderstand the true nature of repentance. Most people think of repentance as a heavy, somber religious duty. In reality, authentic biblical repentance is a life-giving art, renewing the entire soul.

The prophet Isaiah says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength."[\[1\]](#)

Repentance done the right way produces salvation, not shame. That's why the art of repentance is central to the teachings of Jesus and the biblical authors.

The Bible uses two different words for repentance.

In Hebrew, the language of the Jewish scriptures,[\[2\]](#) the word *repentance* is (*shuv*), which can be translated "to return home."[\[3\]](#)

To the biblical authors, home was the Garden of Eden, life as God intended, the creation in rhythm with the Creator. *Eden* literally means "delight." The Garden was the place of *shalom*, peace, wholeness, joy, life, vitality, and delight.

We are a long, long way from Eden.

We live in a beautiful, but damaged world.

To repent is to return to Eden. To go back home. To live as God intended. To step back into the patterns and ways of living God built you for. To live in harmony and alignment with the God who made you.

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word *repentance* is **μετάνοια** (*metanoia*). It comes from the root word **μετανοέω** (*metanoeo*). *Meta* means “to renew and restore” and *noiό* means “to think.” So *metanoia* literally means “to change your thinking.”

To repent is to think about the world in a new way. To view the world in a different light. To doubt your doubts and trust the way of Jesus as true reality.

Some people think of repentance as a one-time act. Something you do when you are saved. But for followers of Jesus, repentance is a way of life.

Jesus puts it this way, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me.”[\[4\]](#)

Every day we slip off the path, the way of Jesus, into broken, twisted patterns of living and thinking, moving farther and farther from Eden.

Jesus invites us to repent—to return home and to live his way. To change the way we think about the world. He puts it this way:

“The time has come...the kingdom of God has come near. *Repent* and believe the good news!”[\[5\]](#) God is up to something in the universe. And because of that, Jesus calls us to repent, to return to Eden.

The story of the Bible begins in a garden, but it ends in a garden-like city. The last two chapters of the Bible are the Apostle John’s panoramic, sweeping vision of the future. He envisions the day when Jesus returns to the earth and makes all things new. He pictures the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven and crashing into earth. And he depicts the eternal city in Eden language.[\[6\]](#)

“The angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal... down the middle of the great street of the city...”

“On each side of the river stood the tree of life...”

“No longer will there be any curse...”

“They will see his face...”

“And they will reign for ever and ever...”[\[7\]](#)

There is coming a day when Jesus remakes the entire creation.

Jesus called it “the renewal of all things.”[\[8\]](#)

John called it “eternal life.”[\[9\]](#)

Paul called it “the age to come.”[\[10\]](#)

Isaiah called it “the new heavens and the new earth.”[\[11\]](#)

But one of my favorite phrases comes from Peter. Acts 3 tells an interesting story. Peter stands up in front of the entire city of Jerusalem and preaches the gospel. He speaks of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In straight-up, bare-bones language, he points out the Israelites’ sins. But then he says:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”[\[12\]](#)

Until the time comes for God to restore everything.

That’s a really compelling vision of the future.

But notice the sequence of Peter’s language. First he tells the people to repent. Return home. Live as God intended back in Eden.

Why?

“So that your sins may be wiped out...”

Plain and simple. You are guilty of crimes against God. The more I am around the Bible, the more I realize we have a really flippant, cavalier attitude about holiness and sin. We don't realize the holiness of God and the danger of sin.

God takes sin really, really seriously.

The scriptures speak of something called “the fear of the LORD.”[\[13\]](#)

What is that?

I have sat through countless sermons where the fear of the Lord was explained away. You hear people say things like, “It doesn't really mean fear. It's more like a deep reverence or respect.”

Really? If that's true, why doesn't God just tell us to revere and respect him?

What if he actually wants us to *fear* him? To be scared of him?

Every summer I take my family on vacation to a small, off-the-beaten-path beach town on the Oregon coast. There is a stunning cape that jets out from the beach into the sea, and it's a really fun hike. But to get out to the cape, you have to walk right past a tall, sharp cliff. It's loud and windy and semi-dangerous. But it's honestly one of the most beautiful places I have ever been in my life.[\[14\]](#)

I love the feeling I get when I walk next to the cliffs, with the wind howling around me and the waves tumbling down below.

It feels like...fear.

I am well aware of the fact that if I take one wrong step, I'm dead. My heart beats through my chest and pushes on my clothes. I'm scared to death. But I *love* being there because I'm in the presence of raw, untamed, dangerous beauty.

And that is the *creation*.

Can you imagine what it would be like to stand in front of the Creator?

The problem is that we fear all the wrong things: the future, money problems, the what-ifs. We need to *fear God*. If we get that right, the other fears fade into the background.

The prophet Isaiah experiences God's presence and the first words out of his mouth are "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."[\[15\]](#)

We need to recapture Isaiah's vision of God. When we do, it will reveal how *unclean* we really are, and how desperately we need forgiveness. I need my sins to be wiped out.

Peter also reminds us that repentance leads to "times of refreshing from the Lord..."

Are you craving times of refreshment?

Repent.

Repentance is the path to life. It's so easy to forget that God wants us joyful! The way of Jesus is the best possible way to live! Obedience is not a somber, heavy, religious duty. Obedience is like a mouthful of crisp, clean water or Alpine air. The way of Jesus is refreshing.

But Peter ends with one more reason God calls us to obey: "...and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything..."

Peter ties repentance to the future. When I think about repentance, I think about the past—my mistakes, failures, sins. And the past pulls me back into shame, guilt, and haunting memories. But Peter says repentance is about the future—the day when Jesus returns and ushers in the age to come. The future pushes me to hope!

Jesus is up to something. He's about to renew the entire universe, but first he's starting with us! We are his "new creation."[\[16\]](#) Microcosms of his renewal of all things.

When we repent, and return to live as God intended back in Eden, we get glimpses...echoes ...glimmers...hints...shadows...pictures of the future, the day when Jesus returns and shouts over the entire earth, "I am making everything new!"[\[17\]](#)

That's why Isaiah speaks of what he calls "the new heavens and the new earth" (the same idea) and says, "The ransomed of the LORD will *return*. They will enter Zion [the theological name for Jerusalem] with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."[\[18\]](#)

There is coming a day when we will return to Eden. When we are back in God's presence for eternity. When your "sorrow and sighing" will run away and turn into "singing and everlasting joy."

That's why John speaks of the New Eden and says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."[\[19\]](#)

The old order of things—anxiety, depression, sorrow, fear, lament—will pass away.

The new heavens and new earth will come.

It's only a matter of time.

For now, we wait. We lean into the future with a pneumatic, moving hope.

And we *repent*. We return home now. Here. Today. And in the art of repentance, we catch glimpses of the glorious hope that awaits.

[1]Isaiah 30v15.

[2]By “Jewish scriptures” I mean Genesis through Malachi. I still haven’t found a good way to rephrase what most modern Jesus followers call the Old Testament. I think Paul would roll over in his grave if he heard us calling *his* Bible the *Old* Testament. Don’t think of Genesis through Malachi as old, passé, or outdated, and the New Testament as what really matters. Think of the OT as Part 1 and the NT as Part 2. It’s one long, beautiful story. In an attempt to rephrase a misleading title, I hear many authors call the OT the “Jewish scriptures.” But it’s not completely accurate. Almost the entire NT was written by Jews as well. I think calling the OT the Jewish scriptures reinforces the erroneous idea that the OT is for Jews/Judaism and the NT is for followers of Jesus/Christianity. That’s absurd. When the NT speaks of the scriptures, it is referring to the Old Testament! So, I want to start calling the Old Testament “Part 1.” Unfortunately, nobody would have a clue what I’m talking about. For that reason, I stick with Jewish scriptures.

[3]I first picked up this translation/idea from *Jewish Spirituality: A Brief Introduction for Christians* by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner.

[4]Luke 9v23.

[5]Mark 1v15.

[6]Revelation 21-22. Two of my favorite chapters in the Bible. Really good stuff.

[7]All five quotes are from Revelation 22v1-5. One from each verse.

[8]Matthew 19v28.

[9]John 5v24-29. I think “eternal life” is how John translates Jesus’ theology of the “kingdom of God” into terms that made sense to Greeks and Hellenistic Jews.

[10]Ephesians 1v21. “The age to come” is the most common Jewish language phrase used for the future. Jewish (and orthodox biblical) theology divides human history into two ages: “this age” and “the age to come.” Not to be confused with heaven, the place where followers of Jesus go at death, in between the ages, to wait for the Second Coming of Jesus. The age to come takes places *after* heaven and *on* earth. For more information pick up *Surprised by Hope* by N. T. Wright, one of my all-time favorite books.

[11]Isaiah 65v17 + 66v22. Hundreds of years later the Apostle John borrows the same verbiage.

[12]Acts 3v19-21. I love how Peter preaches the gospel from the story of Abraham. Everything really gets back to that covenant God made thousands of years ago to a Bedouin out in the desert. “All peoples on earth will be

blessed through you” (Genesis 12v3).

[13]Proverbs 1v7 is a really well-known example, but that phrase shows up countless times in the Bible. Go to Biblegateway.org and search “fear of the LORD.” It will take you hours to read all the texts, but it will give you a really healthy idea of what the scriptures are getting at.

[14]If you’ve ever been to Oregon, you know we don’t have “beaches,” we have a “coast.” In case you’re wondering, it’s Cape Kiwanda in Pacific City. You should go there.

[15]Isaiah 6v5.

[16]Quote from Paul in 2 Corinthians 5v17. He does a great job of translating the Jewish view of eschatology (i.e. the age to come) into more personal terms that make sense for life today, while retaining Jesus’ theology of a “now and not yet” kingdom.

[17]Revelation 21v5.

[18]I love that prophecy! It’s from Isaiah 35v10.

[19]Revelation 21v4. Sorry, I know I’m quoting stuff out of order.

MOVEMENT THREE

The mind: a tricky monster to tame

I am an insomniac.

I have been for years.

Like billions of other humans on the planet, I climb into my bed every night, take one last gulp of water, and turn off the light. But unlike most people...

I lay there...

Wide awake...

For hours on end.

Why? *Because my mind refuses to turn off.*

I think most people have an off switch. They climb in, turn off the light, flip the switch, and go Paul Bunyan on the logs. But not me. I lay there.

In fact, when my body slows down, my mind speeds up to a frenetic pace. Thoughts start racing through my head. Anxiety descends. My chest gets tight. I thrash around in the bed, like somebody is holding a plastic bag over my face.

Counting sheep never works. I am really, really bad at math.

And warm milk? That's just nasty.

There's nothing wrong with my diet or my daily rhythm or my body. The problem is in my mind—my thought life, mental patterns, the way I process information.

Three or four years into my struggles with anxiety and depression, it hit me

like a ton of bricks. I realized I had no control over my mind. My thought life was a wild, untamed, no man's land. When God showed me that, it was one of the most pivotal, important steps forward in my journey toward healing.

Remember, diagnosis is not the end. It's just the beginning. After you diagnose the problem—what's *causing* your anxiety and depression—you need to dig into your soul, rip out the unhealthy pieces, and push everything back into its proper place.

The mind

I would argue that the primary battlefield where we win or lose the fight against anxiety and depression is the mind. Solomon said it himself, “Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression.”[\[1\]](#)

Remember the Hebrew word for *heart* is (*leb*). It means, “inner part, thoughts, and consciousness.” To the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the seat of your thoughts. In today's language, that's the mind.

Solomon's statement is dripping with implications. He means that anxiety, worry, and fear in your mind, causes depression in your emotions and feelings.

Anxiety is mental.

Depression is emotional.

And they are undeniably linked.

How you *think* influences how you *feel*.

Anxiety is a perfect example. You get anxious when your mind is out of control...when you can't stop thinking, *what-if?* Anxiety hits when you're thinking about the future and not the present, yourself and not God, what could go wrong and not what could go right.

Control your thoughts or your thoughts will control you.

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “Men are not prisoners of fate, but prisoners of their own minds.”^[2] He was right in line with King Solomon. Some people are literally prisoners, held captive by rogue thoughts.

Proverbs 23v7 says, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he...”

You are what you think.

I would argue a man is nothing more than the sum total of his thoughts. What a man thinks, he becomes.

You need to learn to think about what you think about. I repeat—think about what you think about. I know it sounds like advice from Mr. Miyagi himself, but it really is genius. Your feelings and emotions are the product of your thoughts. Most people are very in tune with how they feel, but oblivious to how they think.

Is your mind a safe haven where God’s Word—God’s *shalom*—is in control, or is your mind a lawless Wild West where anything goes? Do you give mental real estate to every fear, every what-if, and every anxiety? Are ungodly thoughts free to roam and wreak havoc on your soul?

The scriptures are chock-full of commands about how we think.

Psalm 139v23-24

David prays, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

The warrior poet asks God to probe deep into his heart—thoughts, mental patterns, thinking—and *test* him.

He’s asking God to bring to the surface mental habits that need to die. Questions, habits, patterns, ruts, ways of viewing the world, and ways of processing information that suppress his mental lungs from taking a deep breath of fresh air.

When was the last time you asked God to test your mind, to show you areas where your thought life was out of sync with God's heart?

Take the time to stop, breathe, quiet the noise around you, and ask God to test your thought life and reveal your sins. And when he speaks, confess, repent, and ask him to "lead you in the way everlasting!" Ask him to break your mind out of the ruts your brain is stuck in.

But the problem with ruts is, once you're out, it's easy to slip right back in...

Mental patterns are really hard to break.

By "really hard," *I mean really hard!*

If you want to be free, you have to fight for your life.

2 Corinthians 10v4-5

Paul writes, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. For the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

Make no mistake, you are in a war. The entire universe is caught up in a historic struggle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God. [3] Satan, demons, "principalities and powers," sins, temptations, evil. These are real enemies we face every day. And there are areas where "the enemy" (a junk drawer way of saying all of the above) builds strongholds.

Strongholds are where the enemy is in control, not God. They are places in your life where your power to fight sins and temptations is crippled—where you are imprisoned by warped ways of living.

For some people, anxiety and depression are struggles.

For others, they are strongholds.

Fighting anxiety and depression as "strongholds" is spiritual warfare at its

best. It is why Paul goes on to say, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...”[\[4\]](#)

We fight back. We rip down strongholds. He uses the word *demolish*. We rip the enemy’s strongholds to pieces and wipe the slate clean.

How?

Paul’s answer is brilliant...

“We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”[\[5\]](#)

We...

take...

captive...

every...

thought.

We fight the enemy in the arena of the mind. We take back control of mental patterns and thoughts. We push our thoughts and imaginations out of the ruts of worry and anxiety and lust and doubt and onto the path of trust and hope and purity and faith.

Here is a tangible example:

A thought of worry comes into your mind. *What if I lose my job? What if I fail? What if she rejects me?*

You have two choices.

Option A: You give in to the thought and it pushes you into anxiety. Before you know it you are knee-deep in depression.

Option B: You take the thought captive. You control your mind. You say, “I’m sorry, but you are not allowed in my mind.”

Muster up every scrap of strength and will and passion you have, and push the thought out of your brain.

Every thought in your mind needs to be filtered.

If you are going to survive this war, you need to be a domineering, controlling, micro-managing tyrant when it comes to your thought life. Any and all thoughts outside of God's Word, you take captive, shut up, and expel. You give those thoughts no time. No mental real estate. No free pass. You throw those thoughts into prison. No, better yet, you send them straight to solitary confinement. And when you're done, you throw away the keys.

Easier said than done, right? The mind is a tricky monster to tame.

There are two main ways we fight to control the mind: a tremendous amount of prayer, and a huge, unending supply of the Word of God.

Prayer

The first *weapon* with which we fight mental strongholds is prayer.[\[6\]](#)

Prayer is talking to God. Prayer is listening to God. Prayer is making requests from the God who spoke the universe into existence. Prayer changes reality. Prayer rips open prisons, breaks off chains, and throws open new doors. It's a fact.

Some of Paul's most joyful, ridiculously upbeat letters in the New Testament were written from prison. Philippians was written from the confines of a drab, disgusting prison cell in Rome. And his letter is dripping with joy.

Philippians 4v4+6-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!...Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ

Jesus.”

I think you could rephrase Paul’s words:

Worry about nothing.

Pray about everything.

Thank God for anything.

Notice Paul starts with a command. Be anxious for nothing. Anxiety is the opposite of trust. Paul, inspired by God’s Spirit, commands us to trust in the Living God.

Next Paul tells us how. By prayer. Prayer is how you fight anxiety.

When thoughts of fear enter your mind—*what-if?*—God calls you to pray about your fears.

Turn your anxieties into prayers. Repurpose your fears and worries and dreads into prayers.

And do so with thanksgiving. Inside those prayers you are to thank God in advance for what you know is true.

“God, thank you. You are always with me. Faithful. True.”

Don’t miss that. Gratitude is such an essential part of joy.

And present your requests to God. The imagery is powerful. The language implies you are to lay your worries and your requests down at God’s feet—and then you walk away. You trust.

Here’s the result: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding [makes no logical sense], will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Now Paul was a Jewish rabbi. To the Jewish mind, peace was the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is more than the absence of anxiety. Shalom is the

presence of peace, wholeness, and joy. A soul in tune with its Maker.

We think of peace as the absence of conflict, but God's heart for you is *shalom*. Complete peace *right in the middle of the chaos and noise and traffic of life*.

The peace of God we are craving—gasping for—will show up in you, over you, around you, even as the winds of life are swirling around you like a tornado. It will guard you like a sentry, keeping you safe, not from suffering, but from anxiety. And in doing so, from depression.

The Word

The next weapon we go to war with is God's Word. By "the Word," I mean the scriptures, the Torah, the writings, the prophets, the Bible. In the New Testament, "the Word" means different things—the gospel, Jesus, the message of the kingdom. For my purposes here, I mean the scriptures. The Word is God's Voice to his people.

God spoke by his Word and he speaks by his Spirit. When you connect those two, God moves. When followers of Jesus, filled with the Spirit, read and pour over the scriptures, God enters the hearts of his people.

When you read the Word, you are filling your mind with God's thoughts, God's imaginations, God's mental patterns, and God's way of thinking. You are drowning out the voice of the enemy, with all his lies, and listening to the Voice of Truth.

Truth is like oxygen for the lungs. We inhale truth into our souls. Truth lifts us, helps us, fuels us, clears us, and propels us into the world.

We need lots and lots of truth.

Philippians 4v8-9

Paul goes on to say, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble,

whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things...and the God of peace will be with you.”

It’s a replacement tactic. You replace thoughts that are false with those that are true. Thoughts that are unhealthy, nervous, and incorrect, with those that are noble, right, pure, etc.

What could be more true, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy than the scriptures?

Paul’s closing line can be translated to “meditate on” or “let your mind dwell” or “fill your mind with” these things.

Think, ponder, reflect on, study, memorize, quote, sing, shout, know, and read the scriptures—all the time.

Morning...and evening...and all day long.

Don’t ever start your day without taking time to read the scriptures. Drink in God’s thoughts. Pray over his words.

Don’t ever go through your day without God’s Word in the back of your mind.

Don’t ever end your day without the scriptures as the last thoughts in your mind before you slip into the silence of sleep.

We rebuild mental patterns on and around God’s Word at the center. We read the scriptures, absorbing God’s Voice and transforming how we think. His thoughts become our thoughts. His mind becomes our mind.

It is written, “You have the mind of Christ.”[\[7\]](#)

God’s mind is written on the pages of the Bible, waiting for you to read, study, learn, memorize, and live out.

When struggles with anxiety face you, pour over the pages of the Word, reading truth. And the result is the same as prayer—the God of *shalom* will

be with you.

Prayer and the scriptures: the two central ways we fight back against anxiety in the mind. When fear comes knocking on your door, you are loaded for bear.

When the doctor walks into the room, and the look on his face says it's not good...

When your spouse walks out on you...

When the person you love abandons you...

When your job disappears...

When money runs out...

When the bills start piling up...

When the ground falls out from underneath your feet...

You have two options: surrender to anxiety or fight back. Capitulate to fear or wage war to control your mind.

To recap, here's the path:

First, you take the thought captive. You don't sit around and worry all day long.

Next, you pray. Your prayer sounds something like this: "God, I'm scared to death about the diagnosis/the divorce/making rent, but your Word says, *The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?*^[8] I have nothing to fear. Please rescue and redeem me out of all my struggles. Thank you for always taking care of me like a loving Father. I give all my fears to you and trust you to watch over me."

Next, you read scriptures on trust, faith, the Psalms, etc.

When you are done praying and reading, you walk away in peace.

Peace?

Yes. Peace.

The reality is God is your Father. You are his child. You will be okay. You just need to trust him.

I have two sons. Jude is five, with dark, curly hair. He looks just like his mom. Moses is two, with bright eyes and a wide smile. I love watching my boys play together. They are never anxious. Never depressed.

But every once in a while, they wake up in the middle of the night scared. Sometimes it's a bad dream. Other times it's a monster in the closet (that turns out to be a blanket). You know the drill.

When they wake up crying, all they need to calm down is a minute or two in my arms. Once they feel that security—that safety, the fact that dad is present—they are fine.

The implications are obvious. Jesus calls us to have *faith like a child*. I wonder if that means we need to trust God like my sons trust me. To climb up into his arms, take a deep breath, and know we are safe, as long as we are with him.

I sleep much better these days. It still takes me a while to fall asleep at times. Like my boys, I still wake up with fears, concerns, thoughts that are out of control. My heart still picks up pace. My mind begins to race. But I'm learning to call out to God, to remember my place, and to take my thoughts captive.

I'm learning to take a deep breath, to dwell on his scriptures, and to learn from my boys.

After all, when was the last time you met a stressed-out five year old?

I don't think they exist.

When was the last time you met a stressed-out child of God?

They are all over the place.

Are you one of them?

[1]Proverbs 12v25...again.

[2]From the Pan American Day address, April 15, 1939.

[3]People make two mistakes when it comes to spiritual warfare. One camp thinks there's a demon in every flat tire, sore throat, and spilled cup of coffee. The other ignores the invisible world and lives in the delusion of modern scientism. The scriptures teach there is an invisible war raging all around us, and we are a part of that fight on a regular basis.

[4]2 Corinthians 10v5a.

[5]2 Corinthians 10v5b.

[6]I don't really enjoy using the war motif for prayer. I

think the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament authors push us toward a nonviolent response to evil. “Love your enemies” is a central part of Jesus’ teachings. But there is no doubt the NT paints prayer as a spiritual fight against “the enemy.” It doesn’t matter if you are a pacifist or a soldier. You are in a war.

[\[7\]](#)1 Corinthians 2v16.

[\[8\]](#)Psalm 27v1.

The body: more than a prison

The scriptures tell a unique story about the origins of humanity.

In the book of Genesis, God creates “the heavens [space] and the earth.”[\[1\]](#) The world God builds is made of real, tangible, corporeal elements including trees and rocks and plants and atoms and gases and chemicals. The world is not mystic and ethereal. The world is earthy and concrete.

When God is done architecting the environment, he populates the universe with angels, animals, and humans.

Angels are pure spirits, with no physicality. Angels are immaterial. Yet when necessary, they are able to manifest themselves in bodies for periodic intervals.[\[2\]](#)

Animals, on the other hand, are pure physicality. They have no souls or spirits. Animals don’t question the meaning of life or ponder the origins of the universe. Animals eat and sleep and kill and replicate with no awareness of God.

Yet, humans...they are unique. Humans are both spiritual *and* physical.

Genesis 2 says, “The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground [mud, dust, physicality] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [the spirit], and the man became a living being.”

The words *living being* are (*nephesh*) in the Hebrew, which is also translated “soul.”

Your soul is the whole you—spiritual *and* physical. Theologians say the soul is the “I”—your identity.[\[3\]](#)

And on day seven, when God's work was done, he sat back, looked at his creation, and "saw...that it was very good."[\[4\]](#)

Physicality is good. Mountains and oceans and sunsets and food and drink and fingers and toes and hair follicles are good. Creation is good. *All of creation*—the earth and the body—is very good.

In spite of the sweeping, panoramic story of creation in the Bible, many, many Christians are oblivious to the theology of Genesis.

In my personal opinion, much of modern evangelical theology is more influenced by the teachings of Plato than by the story of the Bible.

Plato, for those of you who missed ninth grade, was a brilliant Greek philosopher who lived in the fourth century BCE. Plato proposed an alternative way of viewing the world—at odds with the theology of the Bible.

Plato taught that there were two worlds, one spiritual and the other material. He argued the spiritual world was good and the material world was evil, corrupted, and twisted. And he carried his dualistic thinking over into his understanding of humanity. He said the human soul was spiritual, and therefore good and pure, but the body was material, and therefore evil. *He separated the body from human identity.* To Plato, the real you was one hundred percent spiritual. Your body was not a part of the real you. He called the body the prison house of the soul.[\[5\]](#)

The result of Platonism was a unique Western European consciousness, based on a dualistic understanding of spirituality. The word *spiritual* came to mean *immaterial, invisible, and otherworldly*, rather than *animated by the Spirit of God* (the way the Bible uses the term). Over time, the theology of the church was corrupted by Platonic thinking. The idea of a dualistic universe (a spiritual world and a material world) is so ingrained in our culture that it is almost impossible to break out of the mental ruts of hundreds of years of thinking. And the modern church is filled with neo-Platonism. I hear unbiblical, Platonic statements all the time.

"My body is not the real me." (Okay, what is?)[\[6\]](#)

“God saved my soul.” (What about your body? The resurrection? Glorification?)[\[7\]](#)

“I’m just passing through this world.” (Where are you going?)

“Heaven (the spiritual world) is my home.” (Really? Not according to the Bible.)[\[8\]](#)

The scriptures paint a different picture of human identity.

Deuteronomy 6v5 says, “Love the LORD your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *strength*.”

1Thessalonians 5v23 says, “May your whole *spirit*, *soul*, and *body* be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (You are going to *need your body* when Jesus returns.)

Hebrews 4v12 says, “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing of *soul* and *spirit*, *joints* and *marrow*; it judges the *thoughts* and *attitudes* of the *heart*...”

The Bible teaches that you are an integrated being—soul, spirit, body, heart, joints, marrow, thoughts, attitudes. You are spiritual and physical.

To the biblical authors, your body is a part of who you are, not a prison in which you are stuck.

Stay with me. I know what you are thinking. What in the world does Platonism have to do with anxiety and depression?

Here’s my point: your soul and body are interdependent. What happens in your body, affects your soul.

Let’s imagine a hypothetical, but common scenario:

You stay up late watching TV or playing video games into the wee hours of the morning.

You don’t sleep well because your brain is fried.

You wake up late, wipe the sleep from your bleary eyes, down three cups of coffee, take no time for exercise, eat sugar and carbs for breakfast, jump on the freeway and drive to work in bumper-to-bumper traffic with your iPod screaming in your ears, rush in to work, sit down at your cubicle with an energy drink from the office vending machine...

And you wonder why you are anxious!

Are you really going to ask why you are stressed out, why God feels distant, or why your heart feels tired and lethargic?

Are you out of your mind? You are trashing your body and wondering why your soul is reaping the consequences.

On the other hand, what happens in your soul affects your body.

Study after study shows stress (anxiety) causes (or at least exacerbates) a wide range of diseases and ills. They include heart disease, ulcers, diabetes, kidney stones, gray hair, chronic fatigue, high blood pressure, strokes, Crohn's disease, and a laundry list of others.[\[9\]](#)

Depression is linked to weight loss (and gain), lethargy, insomnia, fatigue, low sex drive, impotence, and more.[\[10\]](#)

We simply cannot bifurcate our soul and body. We are integrated, holistic beings. How you treat your body influences your soul, for better or worse. That means we need to fight anxiety and depression in a holistic way, on multiple fronts, in both spiritual (prayer, meditation, the scriptures) and physical (exercise, sleep, vitamins, doctors) ways.

Now, I am *not* a doctor. Yet after years of struggling with anxiety and depression, I've come up with a running checklist of holistic questions I ask myself on a regular basis.

Sleep

Am I getting enough sleep?

The average person needs seven to eight hours of sleep per night.[\[11\]](#) Jesus followers love to brag about waking up early and getting by on five or six hours a night. Over time, you pay the price. In my experience, exhaustion is one of the greatest causes of depression. When I get tired, I get depressed.

Remember the story of Elijah? We left off with the prophet praying for God to kill him. The story goes on...

“Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, *Get up and eat*. He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, *Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you*. So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights...”[\[12\]](#)

Elijah was burnt out, depleted, and worn down. What he really needed was sleep, food, water, and some time off.

Sometimes when I’m depressed, I need to pray, fast, wake up at 4 a.m., and seek the Lord. But other times I simply need to go to bed early, sleep in, and take a day off. My body needs to catch up and recharge.

Silence and solitude

Am I getting enough time alone?

Introverts draw strength from being alone. Extroverts draw energy from being around others. Introverts are not bad people. God made some of us more introspective, pensive, and self-aware than others.

Everything I said back in chapter seven holds true. We need to come out of hiding and open up with close friends. But we also need to make time to be alone.

The Gospel of Luke says, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”[\[13\]](#) Jesus (who loved people) carved out time to be alone, think, ponder, pray, meditate, and quiet his soul.

Keep in mind, there is a difference between solitude and isolation. Solitude is when you take time alone to re-center your soul. Isolation is when you hole up and hide from people, escaping the pressures of life. One author says, “Solitude is a chosen separation for refining your soul. Isolation is what you crave when you neglect the first.”[\[14\]](#)

Because I’m a pastor, most people think I’m an extrovert. The truth is, I love people very much, but I *need* time alone *every day*. When I’m around people 24/7 I get grouchy, burnt out, and depressed. I thrive on silence and solitude.

Every morning I take at least an hour to read the scriptures and pray... alone.

Every week I take a Sabbath. On my Sabbath I always take two or three hours to go off by myself, read, think, journal, and pray for the upcoming week.

Every month I take a silence and solitude retreat day. I go to a cabin out in the woods with no cell phone or Internet. I work on upcoming teachings. I plan out the next month’s schedule (including times to be alone). I create space for the Spirit to speak.

I stop.

I listen.

I get my soul back.

If you are an introvert, chances are you need times of silence and solitude.

Exercise

Am I getting enough exercise?

The statistical data linking exercise to anxiety and depression is staggering. A recent study done by the National Health Service in the U.K. revealed that regular aerobic exercise, like running, has the exact same effect on your body as anti-depressants.[\[15\]](#) Guess what I spend a lot of time doing?

Running.

I run about 20-25 miles per week, spread out over five days. In the summers I do triathlons, which means I spend a lot of time swimming and cycling. As a general rule, the more I exercise, the happier I am.

To be honest, when I started running, I hated every mile. By hated, I mean detested. Boring, mundane, hard, laborious. It was grueling. But over time my body got addicted to the increased serotonin levels (the chemical your brain gets from both popping pills and pounding the pavement). I started craving runs, not because I enjoy running, but because I love how it makes me feel.

Unlike anti-depressants, running has no negative side effects (other than weight loss and overall good health). Better yet, it has no shelf life. At some point anti-depressants wear off and lose effectiveness. Many have also been known to cause dependence, several have proven to be completely useless, others carry ridiculous side effects, and most are only effective for a limited number of psychiatric conditions.[\[16\]](#)

Make sure you exercise. Running, swimming, cycling, walking, yoga, Pilates, soccer, basketball—whatever works for your body and weekly rhythm. It doesn't matter what you do, just do something!

Diet

Am I eating healthy?

During my lowest years of anxiety and depression I gained a bunch of weight. I was never obese, but I was unhealthy. Slogging around extra pounds only made matters worse.

My wife and I completely reshaped our dietary habits.[\[17\]](#) We started eating whole, natural, organic foods. I became a *flexitarian* (meaning I'm a fish-eating vegetarian—most of the time). In a matter of months I lost 30 pounds without going on a diet. Now, four years later, I eat like a king and I'm in the best shape of my life.

There are all sorts of studies linking healthy foods like avocado, walnuts, greens, dark chocolate, fish, and red wine to emotional health.[\[18\]](#)

Not only that, but to the Hebrew authors of the Bible, your gut (or stomach), and not your heart, was the seat of your emotions. David prays, “My heart has turned to wax: it has melted within me.” The Hebrew word for *within me* is **מֵעָה** (*me'ah*), which literally means “bowels or digestive tract.”

I would argue, based on ancient Hebrew poetry and modern scientific research, that how you eat influences how you feel. Your diet contributes to your emotions, for good or bad.

Coffee

Am I drinking too much coffee?

I live in a city where coffee is the new wine. The *New York Times* called Portland the best city in the world for coffee.[\[19\]](#) Portlanders eat, sleep, and breathe the black bean. And I have no doubt Jesus would be a fan of Stumptown's latest drip. But I doubt he would drink six cups per day.

Coffee (or to be precise, the caffeine in coffee) takes your body on a wild ride. The caffeine enters your bloodstream and pulses through your body. Once it hits your central nervous system, your body begins blocking adenosine, increasing adrenaline, and elevating dopamine. Your heart rate increases, your pupils dilate, your muscles tighten up, and your energy levels take off.

The caffeine high. Ah, it's a beautiful thing.

Here's the problem: the effects only last a few hours, at which point the high

exhausts your nervous system, dopamine and adrenaline start dropping, fatigue kicks in, and your body crashes.

The result: your body—and your emotions—soars and crashes, up and down. If you are a sanguine, happy kind of person, then you are fine. But if you are prone to anxiety and depression, the results can be tenuous. You can be left tense, nervous, and anxious. Just what you're trying to avoid.

During seasons of high stress, I try to cut way back on my coffee intake. I'm stressed out enough, the last thing I need is caffeine racing through my bloodstream. During times of stress and busyness, we need to exercise more and drink less coffee. But the problem is, the tendency is to exercise less and drink more coffee. We end up in a vicious cycle of addiction to a substance that is harming us, not helping.

Don't get me wrong, coffee is amazing. But drink for pleasure, not for productivity. If you catch yourself pouring another cup of French press to stay focused at work, it's time to slow down and cut back your caffeine intake.

Vitamins + minerals

Am I getting enough vitamins and minerals from my diet?

Most people have a surplus of the wrong chemicals (like caffeine) and a deficiency of the right ones. There are three vitamins and minerals your body needs to stay happy: vitamin D, B-12, and iron.[\[20\]](#)

The best source of vitamin D is the sun. Get outside! Go on a walk. Open up your sunroof when the weather is decent. Sit by the window. Take an afternoon in the park. Point your face at the sun for a minute before you go back indoors. Open up the windows in your house.

I live in Portland, Oregon, which means I take a vitamin D supplement in the winter months. (In case you're not familiar with the Northwest, it rains for about nine months of the year...straight.)

The best source of vitamin B-12 is red meat. You don't need much, but it is absolutely essential. For vegetarians like myself, leafy vegetables like spinach, chard, and kale are also rich in B-12, but you need to eat a lot to get a high enough dose. I have a "green drink" every morning made of an ample serving of fresh spinach, fruits, and apple juice. It's a good way to start the day.

Your body also needs iron. Good sources of iron include red meat, seafood (salmon and tuna are the best), leafy greens like spinach, broccoli, eggs, wheat, oats, beans, and soy products such as tofu, tempeh, and soymilk.

Most doctors recommend you take a multivitamin every day to make up for the deficiencies in your diet. That said, your best bet is always to eat as many plants (fruits and vegetables) as possible. For those of you who are Portlanders, the New Seasons wok bowl is a great place to start.

You should also make an appointment with a good doctor and have your thyroid, adrenals, and vitamin levels tested. Check for food allergies, anemia, and other imbalances in your system. It takes some time and money, but it's worth every penny.

I work with an integrated physician who combines naturopathic and traditional medicine. Because he is naturopathic, he's always looking for root causes, rather than Band-Aid solutions. Naturopathic medicine agrees with my thesis that depression is a symptom, not a disease. It takes the whole person into account.

But my doctor is also traditional, so he doesn't throw conventional western medicine out the door. He always looks at the whole picture, helps me understand all the factors, and suggests the best treatment.

My doctor is not a follower of Jesus, but I am really open and vocal about my faith. We both agree the soul and body are interdependent. He's a huge help to me in working for vitality in my body.

Fresh Air

Am I getting outside?

When God created man, he didn't lock him in a cubicle for 12 hours per day. Genesis 2v8 says, "The LORD God planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed."

I know I'm from Portland, the land of Volvo-hybrid driving, vegan-organic-granola eating, tree-hugging hippies. But wherever you come from, you have to admit we were not made to live indoors. God created the earth as an environment in which humans could thrive.

Recent studies are showing strong links between exposure to natural light and the serotonin system.[\[21\]](#) In street language: we need light to be happy. And that means we need to get outside.

Get out of the city on a regular basis. Go to the beach and walk barefoot in the sand. Climb to the top of a mountain. Go hiking or kayaking or surfing. Slip out of the office on your lunch break and go for a walk in the park. Take deep breaths and flood your lungs with fresh air. Get cold in the winter. Get hot in the summer. Pay attention to the rhythms of creation all around you—the sunsets and sunrises, the patterns in the weather, the changes in the temperature.

Psalms 19 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge."

All creation speaks of the glory, presence, nature, and nearness of God. Wake up and pay attention. It's good for the body, and for the soul.

Holistic worship

You are an integrated being.

Soul and body.

Spiritual and physical.

Both are *you*. Your physical health bleeds over into your emotional health (and vice versa). We treat the *symptoms* of anxiety and depression, by dealing with any and all root causes, some of which may be coming from your body, not your soul.

I think one of the most interesting and paradigm-shifting verses in the Bible is Romans 12v1 where Paul says, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship.”

Notice Paul’s language. Offer your *bodies*. Not your souls, your bodies!

True sanctification and worship of God involves your *soul and your body*. God is after *all of you*. We worship by caring for our spiritual life, by reading the scriptures, prayer, and the disciplines. And we worship by going on a run, eating healthy and whole foods, spending time outside in praise of the Creator, and watching over the bodies God has blessed us with.

True worship is holistic.

[1]Genesis 1v1.

[2]Please note that most of the modern images of

angels are pure fiction. Angels are not Swedish blondes wearing a wedding dress with wings and a wand. In the scriptures, angels are always male. And the most common response from humans to an angelic visit is sheer terror. Most angel stories start off with the angel saying something like, “Do not fear...” That’s because they are actually *terrifying* in real life.

[3]That is how Gerry Breshears, head of the theology department at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, defines *soul*. Gerry, you dominate.

[4]Genesis 1v31.

[5]From Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in *The Republic*.

[6]See 1 Corinthians 3. To Paul, the only “spiritual” people are the followers of Jesus, because we are filled with the Spirit. See also 1 Corinthians 15. Paul talks about resurrection bodies as “spiritual bodies.” He clearly does not understand “spiritual” to mean “immaterial” or “invisible.”

[7]“Glorification” is the technical term used in theology for the final state of individual salvation—the day when God resurrects your body, frees you from sin once and for all, and gives you eternal life.

[8]The Bible never once calls your eternal home “heaven.” The few times that word shows up in the New Testament, it speaks of the place where God is

now, not the place we live forever. The Bible uses much more panoramic language for eternity. See chapter six.

[9]There are studies all over the place recognizing this link. One in particular—connecting certain physical and mental illnesses to stress—was an article titled “Dynamic regulation of mitochondrial functions by glucocorticoids.” It was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in February 2009. It’s heady stuff, but seriously interesting.

[10]The National Institute of Mental Health has dozens of studies and articles that tell about the myriad of symptoms associated with depression.

[11]www.sleepfoundation.org.

[12]1 Kings 19v5-9.

[13]Luke 5v16.

[14]From pg. 71 of *Leading on Empty* by Wayne Cordeiro.

[15]There are *tons* of studies making this point. The one I cited was published by the *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience* in November 2007 in an article titled “How to increase serotonin in the human brain without drugs.”

[16]The *Journal of the American Medical Association: Antidepressant Drug Effects and Depression Severity*, 2010.

[17]The book that really encapsulates how we view food is *In Defense of Food* by Michael Pollen. There are a ton of kooky health books on the market, but this one is *really* good.

[18]Research published in the August 2004 issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry* indicates that study subjects with relapsed depression demonstrated worsened symptoms when their brains contained less tryptophan. This compound becomes serotonin, the brain chemical that promotes relaxation.

[19]Portland was also named the unhappiest city in the U.S. by *Businessweek* in 2009, leading the nation with the highest rate of depression, among other things. Maybe that's why we're so dependent on the black bean.

[20]Studies linking vitamin and mineral deficiency to depression are all over the place. Several specific studies I've found on vitamins and minerals and their role in depression have been reported on by the Mayo Clinic and the National Institute of Health.

[21]Same article in the *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience* (November 2007), referencing a 2005 study on the efficacy of light therapy in the treatment of mood disorders.

Come out of hiding

For years I lived in isolation.

My struggles with anxiety and depression were personal and private, hidden secrets from the world around me.

I became the master of fake. Most people (minus close friends and family) would think of me as happy, optimistic, and upbeat. I was never the miserable-looking kid searching for attention or acting suicidal.

I lived in a church culture where depression was not allowed for the godly. If you were down, it was your own fault. I worked at a healthy, Jesus church with an amazing pastor. He was a godly, humble, intelligent man. Yet he took a really strong stance against anti-depressants, due to the rampant abuse and overuse of medication. He started beating up on depression in his teachings. Much of what he said was raw, biblical truth, and for that I am grateful. But in doing so, he pushed me and others into an insular existence.

Questions started ravaging my thought life. How could somebody who was godly be depressed? Pastors are supposed to be perfect, right? We are the model of spiritual life.

The pressures to perform and fake my joy were suffocating.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not bashing the community I was a part of at that time. It was flawed just like the church I lead now, and *just like all the others churches on the planet*. And I was a part of the problem.

The perfect church is a myth, perpetuated by a spoiled, snooty generation looking for something or somebody to blame for all the world's ills.

The church is a hospital—a place where sick, broken, wounded, flawed

people are made new by Jesus. And where you have sick, hurt, messed-up people, you have a pantheon of problems. But in some crazy, kingdom-of-Jesus way, in the chaos and tension of all the problems and issues in the church, we find healing and rebirth.

Jesus built the church as an incubator for growth in his followers' lives. The New Testament teaching is crystal clear—Jesus is king of the world, he is leading the invasion of earth with his kingdom of God. And during the process of heaven's invasion of earth, the church is the gathering place, the rally point for the people of the kingdom to find healing, new life, community, teaching, and training for kingdom building.

One of the reasons there are so many bitter, disenfranchised people who are angry at the church is because of bad theology. It's really, really important to separate your theology of the kingdom from the church. These are two separate, autonomous entities. Yes, there is overlap and the lines blur and bleed, but they are two different ideas.

Jesus' ultimate goal for the universe is the kingdom, not the church. The kingdom is where the renewal of all things takes place. Where Eden is restored. Where the entire creation is made new.^[1] The story of the Bible ends with heaven crashing into earth. The kingdom is a huge, elephantine theology with layers and texture and depth and dimensions.

The problem is that most people erase or ignore the theology of the kingdom. In doing so, they pin all their hopes and dreams on the church. These unrealistic expectations are way too much to bear for the frail shoulders of God's bride. She was never designed to bear the weight of changing the world, much less perfection. I hear people say things like, "The church is God's plan to save the world."

No, it's not.

Jesus is God's plan to save the world. He is bringing his kingdom crashing into this present age, and *he* is saving the world.

Yes, the church is *part* of God's plan to save the world. That is very true. We are the *body* of the Messiah. Meaning, we are the arms and legs, the

appendages, the extensions of Jesus to the world. We join and partner and work with him for the kingdom; but he is the one saving the universe, not us.

If that is true, what's the point of the church?

Why did Jesus set the church into motion?

What is the church for?

The church exists right in the middle of the kingdom, as a “hold-me-over” for Jesus followers. Paul calls the church in Philippi a “colony of heaven.”^[2] The church is a place to refuel and renew ourselves, together, for further kingdom building.

The word *church* is *ekklessia* in Greek, which can be translated “the gathering of called-out ones.” And that's exactly it. A gathering.

The church is where we, the called-out ones, the Jesus followers, the kingdom builders, gather to draw strength for the enormous task in front of us every day.

And the church is an integral, essential, non-negotiable part of your spiritual life and vitality.

The New Testament authors called the church a family. Brothers. Sisters. Mothers. Fathers.^[3]

Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, “Whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother.”^[4]

Like it or not, you *need* your family. God built dependence into every one of us. He made it impossible for us to do the whole Jesus, kingdom, abundant life deal by ourselves.

The first Christians were aware of the absolute necessity of the church. One of the first stories of the early church says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, *and to fellowship*, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe...”^[5]

Acts goes on to say, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”[\[6\]](#)

“All the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade,”[\[7\]](#) which was part of the temple in Jerusalem.

The early Jesus followers lived together in community, giving to one another, sharing back and forth, coming together on a weekly, if not daily, basis for fellowship.

The English word *fellowship* has become anemic and flat. The Greek word is *koinonia*, which means deep, raw, authentic relationships with depth and substance and honesty and transparency—where conversations push deeper than sports and weather and fashion, where life-on-life digs into the bones and marrow of real, true existence.

Koinonia is what marks the community of God. We have something nobody else has. People from all walks of life:

Jews and Gentiles.

Masters and slaves.

Male and female.

Hipsters and athletes.

Fashionistas and farmers.

We are all bound together around Jesus who is the center.[\[8\]](#)

Jesus built us to do life together, not in isolation. Think back to Genesis and the story of creation. God says, “Let *us* make man in our own image.” God exists in a web of relationship. Father, Son, Spirit. And we are created in God’s image. What does that mean? That means we were created to live like God, in community. We are born with an incumbent, desperate need for relationships.

The phrase *a personal relationship with Jesus* is nowhere in the Bible. I'm not saying we don't have one, but people take that idea way too far. You are not saved into a vacuum. You are saved into a community of called-out ones. Jesus saved us to reconcile us to God *and to people*. Justification has multiple dimensions. The cross makes us right with God and reconnects us to the broken humanity around us.[\[9\]](#)

Take, for example, all the “one another” commands in the New Testament. Love one another. Forgive one another. Bear with one another. It is impossible to obey those commands in a vacuum. You *have* to be in a church.

Think about those commands. Most, if not all, presuppose messiness. “Forgive one another” assumes that people will hurt you. “Bear with one another in love” expects that people will be difficult to get along with.

Jesus knows how screwed up and immature the church can be. Yet he still calls us to step into the community of called-out ones and live his way.

I hear people say things like, “I love Jesus. I just don't like the church.” With all due respect, the Bible says you're a liar. John tells us that “we love because he first loved us. If anyone says, *I love God*, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”[\[10\]](#)

A wise man once said, “No man can have God as his father who does not have the church as his mother.”[\[11\]](#)

There is truth embedded in those words. You cannot separate out your relationship with God from the church.

Think about the fact that almost all of the *you* statements in the New Testament are plural.

Did you catch that? Almost all the references to *you* in the New Testament are plural.

When Paul says, “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's

temple...”[\[12\]](#) he is talking to the entire church in Corinth, not individuals!

You are not God’s temple.

We are God’s temple.[\[13\]](#)

As Americans, we are hyper-individualistic—products of the Enlightenment. We pride ourselves on being unique, special, self-sufficient, capable, and a host of other qualities of which Jesus is not fond. We forget the Bible was written to churches and cities and nations, not individuals. Yes, God is *personal* in that he sees us as sons and daughters, not some hazy mass of humanity. But we are a family—bound together—forever. Yes, God loves John Mark, but the scriptures teach, “God so loved *the world*.”[\[14\]](#)

What does this have to do with anxiety and depression?

Everything.

Many sociologists are noticing the development in the West of a “therapy culture.” An increasing number of people are no longer seeking help for emotional problems from family, friends, and the church. Instead, they are looking to therapists for healing. The problem is, the therapy world often pushes people to view themselves in a Freudian way—as *victims* of the various pains of life. They see themselves as victims of everything from abuse and neglect (which are real and valid crimes) to pregnancy and stress (which are normal struggles of human existence)! Leading sociologists, like Frank Furedi from the University of Kent, argue that therapy culture is bad for individuals and is a significant threat to public health.[\[15\]](#)

Why? Because therapy culture often pushes us deeper into hiding. As individualistic westerners, we are bent toward isolation, not openness. And for many people, therapy sessions are a warped form of individualism. People want to go someplace *safe* where nobody in their real, actual life—people who know them, love them, and have a history with them—get to hear what’s going on deep inside. There is a profound danger to that.

I see more and more people who struggle with anxiety and depression trying to circumvent God’s family and replace brothers and sisters with therapists

and counselors.

Now, please *listen*.

I'm not against therapy.

I am not against counseling! At all. In fact, I think it can be a really healthy experience.

But I do see a disturbing trend. People are trying to replace Jesus and the church with a therapist and a once-a-week counseling session. I interact with many people who are desperate for healing. They place little or no faith in the church family, but practice blind faith in a therapist.

Please listen. Jesus is the Messiah, not your therapist. And the church is your family, not your once-a-week session. There is *nothing wrong* with a weekly counseling appointment, as long as it is only *supplementing*, not replacing, your relationships with brothers and sisters in the church.

Do not underestimate the power of Jesus to heal and the church to help. Some of the most helpful voices in my years of intense depression were ordinary, *normal* friends, with zero training in counseling, psychology, or the inner dynamics of emotional pain. The greatest help to me was actually my wife, Tammy, not my doctor or my counselor. Tammy doesn't have a depressed bone in her body. She is as happy, convivial, and easy-going as they come. She's never taken a single class on psychology or course on mental health. She is *healthy*. And being around her is like medicine for the soul. I have no idea where I would be today if she had not been there, at my side every day, through the years of darkness.

If you want to break free from the hold of anxiety and depression on your life, you *need* to be neck deep in real, down-to-earth, honest, open relationships with your brothers and sisters in Jesus. You have to be part of a healthy, Jesus-centered local church.

The enemy[\[16\]](#) works overtime to pull us away from God's family. He wants you alone. Isolated.

He exposes all the flaws and faults of the church and breeds people who are bitter, angry, hurt, wounded, and angry. As a result, people walk away from the church, in direct disobedience to Jesus, who says “If you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins.”[\[17\]](#)

Your *father!* We are family. And as messed up as the church may be, we need her. The early church father Augustine said, “The church is a whore, but she is still my mother.”[\[18\]](#) In spite of all her flaws, we need her to survive.

When people are isolated and disconnected from the church, it’s easy for the enemy to pick them off and drag them away.

On top of that, most people (not all) who fight depression are introverts. Like we talked about, being introverted and introspective breeds a self-focused mind. It pushes us into melancholy moments. And it’s really, really hard for introverts to obey the New Testament teachings on living in community. We feel safe in hiding. We fake and mask and pretend all day long. We disconnect from the people around us. But when depression comes down hard, we don’t know how to cope. We spiral out of control. Things get dark. We sink deeper and deeper into isolation.

Jesus calls us to...

come...

out...

of...

hiding.

Open up. Live in community. Share your struggles with the brothers and sisters around you. “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other...so that you may be healed.”[\[19\]](#)

Paul, in writing to the church in Galatia about life together, says, “Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”[\[20\]](#)

Three verses later, Paul challenges the Galatians with, “Each one should

carry his own load.”[\[21\]](#)

Confusing? I agree. First he says, “Carry each other’s burdens.” Then he turns around and says, “Each one should carry his own load.”

Pay close attention to his language. Paul is not contradicting himself.

The word *burdens* in Greek is *baros*, which means “a serious, heavy weight.”

The word *load* is *phortion*, which can be translated as “cargo.”

With that in mind, the meaning is clear. All of us have baggage, some cargo we lug around. Sometimes we just need to buck up and carry our own load. We don’t need to walk around vomiting our problems and issues on the entire church and dragging people down with us.

However, sometimes we carry burdens—really serious, heavy stuff.

You are not strong enough to carry your burdens alone. When you face struggles and sins and tragedy and grief and loss and disappointment and unemployment and fear, you need your brothers and sisters to walk with you, at your side, helping you shoulder the load, bear the weight, and keep your head above water.

Paul goes on to say, “If any of you think you are something, when you are nothing, you deceive yourselves.”[\[22\]](#) Meaning, if you think you are strong, tough, self-reliant, and you don’t need to come out of hiding, you are a fool.

Deluded.

Deceived.

Brainwashed.

God built us to face life together as a family. It is in the moments of transparency and openness and community that we find healing and freedom.

All of my greatest “spiritual breakthroughs” have been in the context of community. In spite of how flawed, broken, and in desperate need of help she

is, God uses the church as a hospital for sick people to find new life.

The author of Hebrews says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—all the more as you see the Day approaching.”[\[23\]](#)

Some people don’t live in community. Don’t show up for weekly, regular gatherings. Don’t open up.

Some people “love Jesus and don’t like the church.”[\[24\]](#)

Okay. Stay broken. Stay mad, bitter, and angry. Stay depressed. It’s your choice.

But for people who come out of hiding, God blesses their humility and honesty. Those people find true, lasting healing.

There was a time when I was trying to carry the burden—the crushing weight of anxiety and depression—all alone. I was dying inside. Slowly but surely it was driving me into the ground.

Jesus saved me. Yes, it was him. But the hands that reached down and pulled me out of the grave I was digging belonged to his body.

His sons and daughters.

My brothers and sisters.

By the grace of God, at long last, I opened up. It was really hard. Everything in me was screaming and clawing to escape. But friends and family, brothers and sisters, were all there for me, helping me out of the mess I made.

They are still there. When I have rough days or weeks or months, I know I am not alone. I know people are praying for me, standing with me. I know I will be okay.

Jesus saves.

He saves lost pagans on the other side of the world, and he saves messed-up,

depressed pastors like me in the church.

He can save you from hell—and from hell on earth. He can save you from the darkest struggles and deepest holes. But don't forget he uses the church. It's there, in the community of called-out ones, that God does some of his best work.

She is broken, but she is beautiful.

[1]Matthew 19v28, Revelation 21+22, and Revelation 21v5.

[2]“A colony of heaven” is one possible way of translating Philippians 3v20, which is probably one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon have a great book out called *Resident Aliens* where they get into the idea of the church as a colony of the kingdom.

[3]The New Testament is full of this language. It starts with the early church in Acts and runs throughout the rest of the scriptures.

[4]Matthew 12v50.

[5]Acts 2v42.

[6]Acts 4v32.

[7]Acts 5v12.

[8]I'm pulling from Galatians 3v28. In the first century, that was an *unheard of idea*. Many historians think Paul is the first author in the history of humanity to argue all men are created equal.

[9]If you must know: yes, I am siding with N. T. Wright on the current justification “conversation.” I think he and Piper are talking over one another much of the time, but Wright is forcing us to rethink the doctrine of justification *in light of the Bible*. And that’s always a disturbing, but healthy process. If you have no clue what I am talking about, pick up *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* by N. T. Wright and *The Future of Justification: a Response to N. T. Wright* by John Piper. I far prefer Wright’s work.

[10]1 John 4v19-21.

[11]This was written by Cyprian in the third century. It was part of his Treatise on the Unity of the Church.

[12]1 Corinthians 3v16.

[13]It is true that in 1 Corinthians 6v19, three chapters later, Paul says we are all mini-temples. I guess I’m over-stating my point to fight against the hyper-individualism I face in my life and church.

[14]John 3v16. Duh.

[15]Pick up *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* by Frank Furedi for more details on what sociologists are thinking.

[16]The scriptures teach we have three “enemies”: the world, the *sarx* (sin nature or flesh), and the Satan.

[17]Matthew 6v15. Wow. Really brutal stuff. Jesus is intense on forgiveness.

[18]Nobody knows for sure where that quote comes from, but most think it comes from St. Augustine of Hippo and is referring to the mingling of the church and the Roman Empire that was taking place in his lifetime.

[19]James 5v16.

[20]Galatians 6v2.

[21]Galatians 6v5.

[22]Galatians 6v3.

[23]Hebrews 10v25.

[24]By the way, I am *not* referring to *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* by Dan Kimball. He is actually an old family friend and a total stud. I'm just speaking to a really cancerous attitude that has become very popular within the church and among the twenty-something crowd.

Praying your guts out

The Bible is filled with short, terse, desperate prayers.

“Hosanna!” (The Hebrew word means “save now.”)[1]

“Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.”[2]

“Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”[3]

When you read the stories of Moses, Hannah, Elijah, and the other godly men and women who struggled with anxiety and depression, you learn the primary human response to emotional turmoil is prayer.

When Hannah grieves her barrenness, she goes to the temple and prays, “LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life...”[4]

David struggles with dark, violent emotions. In the midst he prays, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, *Where is your God?*”[5]

Jesus is *in anguish* on the Mount of Olives, writhing in emotional pain, to the point that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” Once again, in the midst, he prays, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”[6]

Time after time, God hears the prayers of his suffering children, and answers.

David looks back on God’s hand in his life and writes:

“In my distress I called to the LORD;

I cried to my God for help.

From his temple he heard my voice;

my cry came before him, into his ears...

He reached down from on high and took hold of me;

he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me...” (Psalm 18v6+16)

In Psalm 40 he remembers the years spent in depression.

“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.

He put a new song in my mouth,

a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear the LORD

and put their trust in him.” (Psalm 40v1-3)

God hears prayer.

God answers prayer.

Your fight with anxiety and depression should push you to prayer. Your emotional pain should push you deeper into the heart of God.

I'm convinced one of the reasons God allows (*note: not causes*) his children to suffer from anxiety and depression is to bring us to a place of dependency and intimacy with him.

As hellish and horrific as my years of darkness were, I would not trade those moments for anything. My anxiety pushed me to God. My depression forced me to my knees.

We live in a culture where independence and self-sufficiency are at the top of the moral ethos.

“But what is highly esteemed to man is an abomination to God.”[\[7\]](#)

God hates pride.[\[8\]](#) He values a “broken and contrite heart.”[\[9\]](#)

Years of anxiety and depression smashed my pride. My independence was ripped away. Self-sufficiency was a distant memory. I was desperate. But my brokenness pushed me to seek God.

Before my struggles with anxiety and depression, my times of reading the Bible and prayer were a begrudging exercise in discipline. In the thick of my struggles, my morning devotions were my source of life, my only hope for survival. And today, in the wake of my years fighting emotional darkness, time with God is built into the rhythm and cadence of my entire life.

Before my struggles, I would read my Bible for ten or fifteen minutes per day, max. Now, I read for a bare minimum of an hour a day. Often it's closer to two.

Before my struggles, I read the Bible because I *should*. Now, I read the scriptures because I am dying to connect with the Living God and hear the Voice speak over me. When you get to a place of intimacy with God, prayer becomes as natural as breathing.

The problem is, for most of us, prayer is a weakness in our walk with God,

rather than a strength. We think of prayer as something we *should* do, rather than a vital, essential connection with the Living One.[\[10\]](#)

Part of the reason we are horrible at prayer is because we are missing four integral pieces of a healthy prayer life: faith, honesty, God-centered requests, and endurance. There are no “four steps to a healthy prayer life.” Steps are insufficient. But there are essential components to a healthy prayer life that we *need* to practice in order to pray—and pray well.

Faith

The seminal statement on faith comes from Hebrews 11v1: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Faith is not a blind, irrational religious naivety. Nor is faith shallow, motionless, intellectual ascent. Faith involves praxis. Faith demands flesh and blood.

Hebrews 11 lists the exploits of the men and women of faith in the Jewish scriptures. Abel. Noah. Gideon. Isaiah. Daniel. The list is endless.

The author starts every story with the phrase *by faith* and then goes on to say that the figure *did something*.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob...

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons...

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea...

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days...

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed...

Hebrews is driving one panoramic point home: faith is more than belief. Faith

is *acting* on what you believe.

Faith is an integral piece of a healthy prayer life. The author of Hebrews goes on to say, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”[\[11\]](#)

Hebrews lays down two mandatory prerequisites for prayer. First off, you need to believe in God.[\[12\]](#)

Okay, check. Most of us get that. To believe in God is central to the way of Jesus. It’s what he says next that trips us up.

We need to believe God “rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Meaning, you need to believe the most primal, simple, formative truth about prayer:

Prayer changes reality.

Prayer moves the hand of God.

The problem is most people don’t really think prayer makes a difference in how God acts. The majority of us are fatalistic when it comes to prayer. Lots of people honestly believe that what’s going to happen is going to happen, with or without prayer. That kind of a twisted, lazy theology is what sucks the life out of people’s prayers.[\[13\]](#)

Are you saying my prayers really make a difference in what God does or does not do? Yes. Do not miss that. Many Jesus followers do. What I’m saying is really important.

Prayer changes reality.

Prayer moves the hand of God.

Dallas Willard writes:

“God’s *response* to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does

not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best...of course this is not the biblical idea of prayer, nor is it the idea of people for whom prayer is a vital part of life.”[\[14\]](#)

When you pray, things happen. And the reverse is also true. When you *don't* pray, things *don't happen*. It is written, “You have not because you ask not.” Do you know what that really means? *You have not because you ask not!*[\[15\]](#) What a novel idea.

I repeat:

Prayer changes reality.

Prayer moves the hand of God.

Jesus is the best example of prayer. He built prayer into the rhythm and fabric of his everyday life.

Luke 5v16 says, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

Mark 1v35 says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

Matthew 26v44 says, “He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.”

Prayer was anything but sporadic or weak for Jesus. After watching Jesus’ prayer life, the disciples ask him, “Teach us to pray.” His response is called “the Lord’s Prayer” by today’s Christians, but really it should be called the disciple’s prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’ sketch or outline for how we are to pray. And it’s important to note his first request in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Notice two things about the request.

First off, Jesus presupposes we live in a world where God’s will is not done. Are the evils of mankind—rape, murder, genocide, famine, poverty, disease,

death—the will of God? Absolutely not. Evil is the result of human and angelic[16] rebellion against God.[17] What about anxiety and depression? Is emotional pain the will of God? No. God created *shalom* to be the emotional state of humans.

Secondly, notice the goal of prayer is to accomplish God’s will, not yours. “*Your* will be done...”

I’ve heard it said, the goal of prayer is not to get my will done in heaven, but God’s will done on earth. There’s truth in that.

God-centered requests

One of the reasons prayer breaks down in our lives is because we ask for the wrong things. Prayer gets twisted and warped into a futile attempt to manipulate God into hooking us up. Nothing could be further from God’s heart.

Jesus teaches us to pray “in his name.” He says, “If you ask me for *anything in my name*, I will do it.” Later he says, “The Father will give you whatever you ask *in my name*.”[18]

What does it mean to pray “in Jesus’ name?”

In Jewish culture, your name was attached to your nature or your character or your personality. “In Jesus’ name” is not a magic formula like “open sesame” or hollow religious liturgy. To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray in alignment with his heart, to pray in harmony with his desires and hopes and plans, to make requests you know are in line with God’s will.

Too often we treat God like a cosmic vending machine. Prayer becomes a callow, immature attempt at controlling our environment, rather than a passionate partnership with God to bring about his kingdom on earth.

Vending machine prayers sound like, “God, my marriage is a wreck. Fix my marriage. Make me happy with my spouse.”

Prayers *in Jesus' name* sound like, “God, my marriage needs your healing Spirit. Please transform me from the inside out and help me to love my wife.”

Notice the difference? Subtle, but huge.

One of the tools I employ to keep me praying in Jesus' name is to pray the scriptures. For anxiety and depression, the Psalms are the best. I read three Psalms every day, first thing in the morning. I make David's prayers my prayers. I pray God's Word back to him, because I know he inspired those requests.

When you pray about your struggles with anxiety and depression, don't simply whine at God and ask him to make you happy. Quote the scriptures. Ask him to stay true to the written Word. Confess your sin (the root causes). Repent. Ask for the Spirit because “the fruit of the Spirit is *love, joy, peace...*”[\[19\]](#) Pray in line with God's heart for you.

Pray in Jesus' name.

Honesty

Another missing element in people's prayer life is honesty. We pretend in prayer. We employ cheap, fake words we don't mean. Clichés are a waste of oxygen and plastic prayers are a waste of time.

God knows your thoughts! What's the point of masking how you feel? It is written, “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me...you perceive my thoughts from afar...before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.”[\[20\]](#) Every nook and cranny of your inner being is naked, exposed, and laid bare in the eyes of God.[\[21\]](#)

God values authenticity. He's not scared of your fears and doubts and questions and struggles. He knows about the skeletons in your closet.

Listen to how David prays.

“Why, LORD, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10v1)

“How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13v1)

Or what about Jeremiah? The prophet vented before God:

“My eyes fail from weeping,

I am in torment within;

my heart is poured out on the ground

because my people are destroyed,

Because children and infants faint

in the streets of the city.” (Lamentations 2v11)

He blames God, saying,

“He has barred my way with blocks of stone;

he has made my paths crooked...

He has broken my teeth with gravel;

he has trampled me in the dust.” (Lamentations 3v9)

Not only did God hear these brazen, uncut, gushing prayers, he also included them in the scriptures. God wants us to be honest and open with him about our inner turmoil.

The greatest leaders in Israel’s history were forthright, almost insolent with God—standing right on the border between courage and disrespect.

Abraham prays, “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”[\[22\]](#)

Moses prays, “LORD...why should your anger burn against your

people...why should the Egyptians say, *It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them on the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?* Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.”[\[23\]](#)

Abraham and Moses—two of the greatest men of faith in the Bible—are wrestling with God. Questioning his justice. Holding God to his Word.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not advocating irreverent, disrespectful prayers to the Creator of all things. I’m simply making the point that it’s okay to pray with honesty and transparency. God is not upset by candid prayers. In fact, if the scriptures teach us anything about prayer, it’s that God *appreciates* honest, to-the-point conversations with his people.

Throw out spineless, rehearsed, rote prayers and be honest with God. For crying out loud—you’re struggling with anxiety and depression! Your soul is hemorrhaging! You are way past facades and charades. If you are desperate, pray like you are desperate.

Learn the art of praying your guts out.

Endurance

As important as faith, God-centered requests, and honesty are in prayer, they are of no avail without endurance. By endurance I mean...

Perseverance.

Patience.

Consistency.

Faithfulness.

Resolve.

Grit.

Stubborn refusal to give up.

The reality is prayer takes time. Lots of time. Yes, there are moments when you pray and seconds later, God answers. In fact, just the other day my wife and I made three requests for our boys, Jude and Moses, and within 24 hours all three prayers were answered. It was exhilarating.

But it's not always like that. Sometimes you pray and nothing happens. You pray again.

Nothing.

You pray again.

Zip. Zilch. Nada.

It's hard not to get discouraged and throw in the towel. That's exactly why Jesus tells a story about a widow with some serious chutzpah.

“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.[\[24\]](#) He said, *In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’*

For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’

And the Lord said, *Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”*[\[25\]](#)

Don't misunderstand the story. Jesus is not saying God is like the rude, calloused jerk in the story who ignores the widow. He is saying, if an unjust

judge hears the widow's prayer, *how much more* will God, your Father in heaven, hear your prayer?

The point of Jesus' story is *don't give up*. When you pray and all you get is silence. When heaven is a concrete wall. When you feel like God is ignoring you. *Wear God out* by coming to him again and again!

The story in Luke fits right in with Jesus saying, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened." [\[26\]](#)

The three verbs—ask, seek, and knock—are present progressives in the Greek. Meaning, the text can be translated, "Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking."

God wants you to make the same requests over and over and over again. Why? Well, for one he wants to be with you. And you need to be with him. The nature of prayer is mysterious and enigmatic to say the least. But there is something about the asking, seeking, and knocking that God values.

Remember, God wants to bring us to a place of intimacy with him. He's more interested in the evolving mechanics of your soul than the short-lived emotions of your heart. Because he loves you, he's willing to hold back the answers to your prayers and allow a time of pain, if that's what it takes, in order to make something beautiful out of you. But that does not mean your prayers are futile attempts at appeasing God. He really hears your prayer. Your requests really do make a difference in how the world operates. It simply takes time.

Pray.

In faith.

In line with Jesus' heart.

Honest, genuine prayers. And...

don't...

give...

up.

[[1](#)]John 12v13.

[[2](#)]Psalm 16v1.

[[3](#)]Matthew 8v25.

[[4](#)]1 Samuel 1v11.

[[5](#)]Psalm 42v9-10.

[[6](#)]Luke 22v42-44.

[[7](#)]Luke 16v15.

[[8](#)]God hates? Yes. Because God is love, he hates sin because of the damage it wreaks on the creation. In Proverbs 6v16-19, there's a list of "seven things God hates." At the top of the list is "haughty eyes," a Jewish euphemism for pride.

[9]Psalm 51v17.

[10]In Revelation 1v18 Jesus says, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever!” The story/reality/doctrine of the resurrection is one of my favorites in the scriptures. I love to think of Jesus as the Living One, alive, back from the dead, and more than capable of taking on my worst problems. If he can break the spine of death itself, is anything impossible for God?

[11]Hebrews 11v6.

[12]By “belief” here, I mean intellectual ascent. The English word *belief* doesn’t do a great job of capturing the biblical concept, which is more like trust.

[13]It’s no secret I’m not a Calvinist, especially when it comes to the doctrine of providence. I have a really, really high theology of human responsibility (or free will). Your view of providence will make or break your prayer life. If you think the doctrine of God’s sovereignty means “what’s going to happen is going to happen, with or without my prayers,” you are doomed to a dismal, impotent prayer life. There is no way for your mind to get any kind of traction with that sort of theology of providence. At least not in my personal opinion. If that offends you, I’m sorry. But hey, it’s a book, not a sermon, and I’m entitled to my opinions.

[14]From *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard. A

must read for any serious disciple of Jesus.

[15]“You have not because you ask not” is a quote attributed by most people to Jesus. In reality, it’s a combination of two different verses, one from Jesus and another from James. In Matthew 7v8 Jesus says, “For everyone who asks receives.” In James 4v2 he writes, “You do not have because you do not ask God.” I’m sorry for quoting a mishmash of scripture, but the biblical authors often did the same (i.e. John 7v38 + 1 Cor. 2v9).

[16]By “angelic” I mean demonic. Demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in rebellion against God. For a phenomenal read on spiritual warfare, pick up *God at War* by Greg Boyd. I don’t buy into open theism, but his insights into human and angelic free will and the resulting chaos are biblical, brilliant, and paradigm shifting.

[17]I admit my explanation of evil is a gross oversimplification, but it’s a good push in the right direction of a biblical theology of evil.

[18]John 14v14 and John 15v16. See also John 14v13 and 16v23-26.

[19]Galatians 5v22.

[20]Psalm 139v1-4.

[21]I’m alluding to Hebrews 4v13.

[22]From the story of Sodom and Gomorrah recorded

in Genesis 18v16-33.

[23]In Exodus 32, God almost wipes out the Israeli people because of idolatry. Moses argues and connives with God in prayer. Notice the result: God *changes his mind*. Moses uses the word *relent*. God relents. The Bible is full of stories like Exodus 32 that people try to explain away. If “what’s going to happen is going to happen, with or without my prayers,” how do you handle Moses, Hezekiah, and Hannah?

[24]The NKJV says, “...and not lose heart.”

[25]From Luke 18v1-8.

[26]From earlier in Luke’s gospel, 11v9-10.

Psalm 30

I will exalt you, LORD,
for you lifted me out of
the depths and did not let
my enemies gloat over me.
LORD my God, I called
to you for help, and you
healed me. You, LORD,
brought me up from the
realm of the dead; you
spared me from going
down to the pit.

Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

When I felt secure, I said, “I will never be shaken.” LORD, when

you favored me, you
made my royal moun-
tain stand firm; but
when you hid your face
I was dismayed.

To you, LORD, I
called; to the Lord I
cried for mercy: “What
is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise
you? Will it proclaim

your faithfulness? Hear, LORD, and be merciful to me; LORD, be my help.”

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.

Epilogue: Time, waiting, and the absolute necessity of hope

Healing takes time.

We live in the day of microwaves and jet airplanes and UPS overnight shipping and e-mail and credit cards. The world is at our fingertips. But there is no cheating the soul.

We live in a world where we can plant a man on the moon. But we cannot overcome the damage of abuse.

We can pick up a scrap of plastic and talk to somebody on the other side of the planet. But more than half of us cannot stay in a marriage for more than a few years.

We have the ability to dissect matter at a subatomic level and blow up an entire city with the push of a button. But we cannot cope with the wounds inflicted by tragedy, grief, and loss.

For all our intelligence, ingenuity, and brilliance, we remain a violent, hurting people. We don't know how to repair the soul.

We never have.

We never will.

No technology, no government, no self-help book has the power to reassemble the broken pieces of the human heart. God is the only hope for the desperate.

When Ted Turner said God is a crutch for the weak,[\[1\]](#) he was absolutely

right. God *is* a crutch.

And a wheelchair.

And a doctor.

And a hospital.

Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”[\[2\]](#)

Jesus came for sick, broken, weak, flawed people like us. He feels no condescending pity, only love. Jesus is in the business of repairing broken people. But healing is not a cheap trick. It takes time to undo years of sin, abuse, and dysfunction. The greater the wounds, the longer it takes to heal. The causes of anxiety and depression are ingrained deep in the patterns and ruts of our lives. It takes time to wash those out and build new roads toward joy.

I would argue that healing people from anxiety and depression (or to be precise, from the *causes* of anxiety and depression) is much harder than making a lame man walk or a deaf man hear. Souls are much more complicated than legs and ears.

I can now say, “God healed me.” 12 years ago my world imploded on me. The man I remember is gone. My time in “the darkest valley”[\[3\]](#) shapes me, but it no longer defines me. Every year I get a little bit stronger. Every year I move farther down the path toward joy. But twelve years is a long, long time.

What is needed is patient waiting.

I’ve heard it said that “Godliness is long obedience in the same direction.”[\[4\]](#)

Godliness is praying, working, asking, seeking, knocking, and fighting for joy day-in and day-out, *for years*, without wavering.

Faith is about faithfulness.

We are always asking the question, “How can I get out of this?” To be honest, we are asking the wrong question. The right query is, “*What* can I get

out of this?

Not how, but what.

What growth, what depth, what truth can I siphon out of this time of tragedy and sorrow? What character, what maturity, what wisdom can I finagle from this war with anxiety and depression?

Character does not happen overnight. Progressive sanctification is a journey, not a destination. It is a lifelong process, not a momentary event. God does not zap us into godly people. He grows and matures and stretches and leads us into becoming the people he intended. And for most of us it takes pain to remake us into the people of God.

I'm not trying to diminish the gravity of your pain. I know how much it hurts. But don't run from your pain. Don't try to escape. This is your story. And "in all things God works for the good of those who love him."[\[5\]](#) *All things.* Anxiety. Depression. Pain. Jesus redeems *all* things. That means he takes ugly, sick, evil wounds and turns them into beautiful works of art.

That is the story of my life.

That is the story of Jesus.

As crazy as it sounds, if you follow Jesus out of the mess you're in right now, there will come a day when you look back on your years of darkness and thank God. Don't get me wrong. It will always be a bad memory. When I think about my life ten years ago, I get chills up my spine. But you will get to a point where the good far outweighs the bad. Where God has used your anxiety and depression in ways you would have never dreamed.

Do you believe that?

Don't forget verses like...

"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."[\[6\]](#)

"Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete,

not lacking anything.”[\[7\]](#)

“We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame...”[\[8\]](#)

Hope does not put us to shame.

Hope is indestructible. Hope refuses to give up. Hope never caves in.

There were moments on my journey when I was hanging on by a thread. The only thing keeping me from ending my life was hope. She was always there, taunting me with a playful smile, calling me to take one more step.

Never, ever walk out on hope. She is your lifeline. Without hope, you are dead in the water.

David prays,

“I would have lost heart

unless I had believed

that I would see the goodness of the Lord

in the land of the living.

Wait, I say, on the Lord...”[\[9\]](#)

You have to believe healing is possible in Jesus. Freedom from your prison, your hell, is possible with the God who makes all things new. For followers of Jesus, the best is always yet to come. You have to believe that. You have to hope.

Yes, there are days, months, and for some of us years, of mourning. But it’s only for a *night*. It’s only for a time. There is a light breaking over the horizon.

Hope screams at you every day. She calls to you, invites you, and refuses to

shut up. Over and over she says...

“Joy comes in the morning.”

And the morning is coming soon.

[1]I believe the verbatim quote is, “Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers.”

[2]Luke 5v31.

[3]From Psalm 23v4. Other translations have “the valley of the shadow of death.”

[4]I first heard “Godliness is long obedience in the same direction” in a counseling session with my friend Bill Keyes. I have no idea where it comes from, but I love the wording.

[5]Romans 8v28. Very well-known line, but most people only quote the first half of the verse. The Bible

does *not* teach God works all things together for good (in my opinion). We live in a fallen world where many things are simply evil. Paul's point is that in all things, even the brutal, hard, evil things, God works for the good (the redemption of the world) in the lives of "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The idea is, if you give your life over to Jesus, even the bitter, ugly pieces, God will reassemble you into something beautiful.

[6]Hebrews 10v36.

[7]James 1v4.

[8]Man, what a great text. Romans 5v3-5.

[9]Psalm 27v113-14 in the New King Jimmy.

Appendix: The death of behavior modification

Most of the New Testament was written by a man named Paul.[\[1\]](#) He wrote something like 13 books on everything from heaven and hell to women praying without head coverings. Paul was a thinker, philosopher, apostle, prophet, pastor, missionary, church planter, tent maker, scholar, writer, leader—you name it. Many of the truths we take for granted today are hand-me-downs from Paul's life.

But long before Paul was the brilliant, amazing, famous first-century apostle, he was Saul, the angry, cruel, self-righteous Pharisee who was known for killing Jesus' followers (not making them), and suffocating the gospel rather than preaching it.

After a supernatural encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (en route to haul the local followers of *the Way* off to prison), Paul comes to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the living God incarnate.[\[2\]](#) But he carries some serious baggage into his new life.

Can you imagine the guilt, shame, embarrassment, sorrow? Living with the memories of killing Jesus' followers? Innocent fathers and mothers. Leaving widows and orphans in the wake of your religious genocide.

And on top of that, Paul's life as an apostle was really, really hard. Here's his autobiography:

"I have been...exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger

from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches...”[3]

Wow. Intense. You would think Paul would be a depressed, miserable, unstable, emotional train wreck, right?

But he goes on to say...

“Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...”[4]

Paul’s life, in spite of the brutal memories and violent hardships, was marked by joy and peace.

Pain, suffering, poverty, persecution, prison, torture—sorrowful, yet always rejoicing?

Not only that, Paul *commands* joy and peace. Seriously.

He says, “Be joyful always” to the Jesus followers in Thessalonica. To Paul, joy is an emotion, *and* joy is an act of the will. Joy is a premeditated, deliberate act of obedience and worship. Wow.

Paul commands peace. He writes a letter to his friends in Philippi and says, “Do not be anxious about anything...”[5]

To Paul, joy and peace (the opposites of anxiety and depression) are not volatile, cataclysmic emotions we have no power over, ripping our lives apart like hurricanes. Rather, they are character qualities of Jesus we learn, practice, and develop as disciples of Jesus. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lumps joy and peace in with the other Christian virtues: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control...”[6]

Meaning, as followers of Jesus, joy and peace are qualities we pray, work, fight, labor, and bleed for, just like love, patience, kindness, and the like.

Nobody's perfect

Now, nobody is perfect. But the New Testament teaches us, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.”^[7] Meaning, *whatever* you are going through, you are *not alone*. No matter how dark, nasty, or messed up you think you are, I promise you, others are struggling with the same things. That said, we all have different weaknesses. We read Paul's list in Galatians and it points out strengths and weaknesses for every one of us.

Self-control comes natural for me. I'm a type-A, workaholic, kind of guy. But I really stink at patience. My wife, on the other hand, is about the most patient, loving, kind person on the planet. I guess opposites...*you know*. But for her, self-control is really difficult. We are hardwired by God with different strengths and weakness. For the next 50 years, I will fight and bleed to do what she does in her sleep, show patience to people. And she will labor and toil and pray for God's help to do what is a walk in the park for me.

My point is, for some people joy and peace are *natural*. I love people like that. Happy. Go with the flow. Phlegmatic. Optimistic. My best friend is a walking party. I'm a walking...funeral?

But for others, like myself, these virtues are straight-up hard work. My guess is, if you're reading this book, you (or somebody you love) struggle with anxiety and depression. That means joy and peace are not natural for you.

Identity

Now, we all know we are born *bent*, with different weaknesses and shortcomings. Tell me something I don't already know. Here's the problem: most of us define ourselves by these struggles.

I hear things all the time like...

“I'm depressed.”

“I'm obsessive compulsive.”

“I’m not a happy person.”

“I’m an addict.”

“I wish I was more like so and so.”

And sometimes the church backs up these fatalistic lies about identity. Here’s one of the most common heresies in the church: “We are sinners saved by grace.” Sounds true, right? I remember hearing that in sermons, books, songs, conversations everywhere.

Did you know it’s not true? The Bible never calls us “sinners saved by grace.” In fact the Bible never—not once—calls followers of Jesus “sinners.” The word is used all the time, in particular by Jesus, but it always speaks of those outside the faith.

Here’s what the Bible calls you: saints,[\[8\]](#) children of God,[\[9\]](#) blameless,[\[10\]](#) chosen,[\[11\]](#) God’s special possession,[\[12\]](#) priests,[\[13\]](#) righteous,[\[14\]](#) faithful.[\[15\]](#)

Really? Me?

Yup.

Paul opens most of his letters by saying, “To the saints in...” Ephesus or Corinth or Philippi. If he wrote a letter to my church, I have no doubt the opening line would be “to the saints in Portland...”

Yes, we sin—don’t get me wrong. But sin is no longer what defines us. We *were sinners*, but now, because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are “saints (who fight sin on a regular basis and fall from time to time) saved by grace.”

This revolves around issues of identity. Who are we? What makes me, *me*?

We define ourselves by our past. Who is John Mark? He is the guy who was born in 1980; the skinny, lanky kid who was really bad at sports, so he played in a band.

God defines us by our *future*! Who is John Mark? The guy who is with God, glorified, on the new earth, living out God's kingdom...

Keep in mind, unlike us, God exists outside of space and time. The prophet Isaiah says God makes known “the end from the beginning.”[\[16\]](#) God stares down on human history, and in one glance, sees creation, the garden, the fall, Abraham, Israel, Jesus, the early church, your life today, judgment, the resurrection, the age to come—all at once! He sees you as a fetus in your mother's womb, an aging man with a cane, and at Jesus' side on the new earth—in one glance. He defines you by your future.

To God, your identity is rooted, not in the past (who you were)...

Not in the present (who you are)...

But in the future. Who you are *becoming*.

The technical term used in theology is “eschatological realism,” which is a fancy way of saying *you are in the process of becoming who you really are*.

You are holy; and you are in the process of becoming holy.

You are pure; and you are in the process of becoming pure. Really?

You are blameless. I am? Yes. And you are in the process of becoming blameless.

Who you are is fluid, dynamic, evolving. Every day is a journey toward your true identity: saints, children of God, priests, etc.

The New Testament says things like, “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”[\[17\]](#)

Paul's pattern in his letters is to start with huge, heady theology about who we really are in Christ. He uses thick words like *predestined*, *adopted*, *chosen*, etc. But at some point in all his letters, he shifts and says things like, “Therefore...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” What he means is: here's who you really are, now go live up to your true identity.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. What in the world does eschatological realism have to do with anxiety and depression?

Everything.

This might sound like irrelevant theology and semantics, but it's really central stuff. We are disciples of Jesus. And the goal of discipleship is to know Jesus and become like him.

What am I saying? I'm saying this is not a self-help book. My goal is not to help you be happy, but to help you be like Jesus. I'm not after behavior modification, but after the relentless pursuit of Jesus and living in tune with his way.

Roadblocks

Here's the problem. For all of us there are obstacles keeping us from becoming who we really are. Think of life as a long journey. At the end of the road is Jesus. The point of life is to know Jesus and become like him, by walking toward him. But in between you and your destination are roadblocks, things keeping you from moving toward your goal, in your way, slowing you down, sometimes stopping you in your tracks.

For some people, anxiety and depression are those roadblocks. Discipleship is about pushing those roadblocks out of the way, dealing with your junk, breaking through, and moving on toward Jesus.

But the goal must be discipleship, not happiness. It's not bad to want to be happy—that's human. But we need to pursue something greater than our own happiness. We need to pursue Jesus.

I'm not interested in behavior modification or self-help. My hope and prayer is that this book helps you pursue Jesus.

Here's the good news. Jesus is *really happy*. He is marked by joy and peace. If the goal of life is knowing him and becoming like him, one of the many

results will be joy and peace in our own lives.

When I read the Gospels I imagine laughter in Jesus' tone of voice.

I hope people hear it in mine.

[1]Romans, 1+2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1+2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles (I think), Philemon, and some argue Hebrews.

[2]The story is found in Acts 9.

[3]2 Corinthians 11v23-28.

[4]2 Corinthians 6v10.

[5]Philippians 4v6.

[6]Galatians 5v22-23.

[7]1 Corinthians 10v13.

[8]"Saints" is how the New King James translates **ἁγίοις** (*hagios*). The NIV has "his holy people."

[[9](#)]1 John 3v1.

[[10](#)]Ephesians 1v4.

[[11](#)]1 Peter 2v9.

[[12](#)]Also 1 Peter 2v9.

[[13](#)]Revelation 5v10.

[[14](#)]Matthew 13v49.

[[15](#)]Ephesians 1v1

[[16](#)]Isaiah 46v10.

[[17](#)]Ephesians 5v8.

Thanks

My wife, Tammy, for not giving up on me when I was a wreck. I would have thrown in the towel. Thank you.

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And above all...

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About the author



[John Mark Comer](#) serves as the lead pastor of Solid Rock Church in Portland, Oregon, a city voted as the “most depressed in America” by a recent nationwide study. Coffee, food, culture, indie bands, and lots of depressed people. *He fits right in.*

Prior to planting Solid Rock in 2003, John Mark was the college pastor at a large Calvary Chapel church and played in a band signed to BEC recordings.

John Mark is married to Tammy and they have two boys, Jude and Moses. They are in the process of adopting a little girl from Uganda.

For more of John Mark’s teachings on the Bible, Jesus, and the ups and downs of life, go to ajesuschurch.org and sign up for the regular podcast.

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