

Modern Longings; Ancient Words -- Mental Health

Psalms 42-43

I'll start by singing part of a blues song called "*Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone*." Then...

I wanted to begin by singing part of one of my favorite blues songs – because we come today to two blues Psalms, i.e., Psalms 42-43. In fact, wherever we experience the music, poetry, literature and visual art of any culture at any time, we discover that people have always used the arts to express the struggles they are having with life. What we call "singing the blues" is cross-cultural.

In our day, many of the "blues" we feel fall under the category we call "mental health"; including things like anxiety and panic attacks, depression, bipolar issues, paranoia and schizophrenia, PTSD, dementia, obsessive compulsive disorders as well as many of the addictive disorders that are so prevalent in our world.

Many kinds of things lead to mental health struggles:

- **Things done to us** – Physical, verbal and sexual abuse can provoke all sorts of mental health issues, often affecting the abused persons in ways that they might not even be conscious of.
- **Stress-filled settings we are in** – Overcrowded conditions, situations of extreme poverty, dysfunctional family relationships, etc. often have a powerful impact on those in those settings.

A number of years ago, a seminal study was done by the US Center for Disease Control and Kaiser-Permanente called the "*Adverse Childhood Experience Study*" (ACEs) that demonstrated the effect abuse, neglect and stress-filled experiences have upon a person's later-life mental and physical health. Here is a chart showing how enormous it is. www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/images/acestudy/ace_pyramid_lrg.png The chart shows how trauma and trauma-inducing social factors in childhood (see bottom of chart) lead to disease, disability and even early death in later life (top of chart). This has made me wonder how the conditions being reported about the migrant children being held currently in detention centers at our borders will impact the lives mentally and physically of those children being held.

- **Biological factors** – Some people have chemical imbalances that need to be addressed; others simply seem to possess predispositions toward depression, anxiety, etc.

All to say, in my experience, I've come to recognize that **there are factors both external and internal that affect our mental health**. I believe you will see them expressed in Psalm 42-43. For example, the Psalmist certainly felt like he was surrounded by hostile opponents in 42:10 & 43:1-2. At the same time, the Psalm is permeated by evidences of him being prone by nature to being downcast and fear-filled.

Ancient Words for a Modern Longing – *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why are you so disturbed?*

Mental health is such an important issue for our time. When I chose the series title, *Modern Longings; Ancient Word* I knew I had to at least introduce the topic as well as to ask how the ancient words of the Bible speak to it. I became aware of how significant this matter of mental health currently is as I was speaking this past March with some student development professionals in Christian universities. They told me that there are four main issues that students say they hope their schools and churches will acknowledge and help them address: Race, sexual identity, and gender (i.e., #metoo) were three they mentioned. Kara Powell in our church, who engages in significant research among students, confirmed that she is hearing the same.

But, more pressing than all those was this matter of mental health. A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center www.pewsocialtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/02/PSDT_02.20.19_teens-00-00.png?resize=310,508 pointed out that the issues of depression and anxiety top the list of concerns college students see among their college-age peers. And these mental health concerns cross ethnic and socio-economic lines. Those from every ethnicity and economic level spoke of it.

That's the modern longing, i.e., one for mental and emotional wholeness. When we turn to the ancient words in our Scripture text, we discover that, although the Psalmist wrote as much as 3,000 years ago, he confessed to the same kinds of struggles that fill our society today. He used two significant words in each of the Psalms' three stanzas: "downcast" and "disturbed" (**42:5,11; 43:5**). Those ancient words describe what we feel when we speak of mental health.

1. **"Downcast"** – A word for melting away; cast down into darkness. It's a word that expresses what everyone who has opened up to me about depression says it feels like, i.e., a dark blanket being pulled up over their heads. It's a feeling that all inner strength has melted away leaving you in utter darkness.

2. **Disturbed** – This is a word meaning to feel disoriented, agitated and restless.

Put together, those two words express a rather comprehensive description of the feelings people express when they are going through times of emotional and mental distress. We have newer names for mental health issues – but they clearly are a part of ongoing human experience in this imperfect and fallen world regardless of when a person lived or where a person lives. To me, it is clear that God inspired these psalms to be placed in Scripture to speak into these common experiences of human beings struggling with mental health in this world. They are ancient words – addressing modern longings.

#Ustoo -- My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you, O God (42:6).

There are many things I could speak about from these Psalms, but one of the most important is that you should not be surprised when you or others in our church family wrestle with the same kinds of mental and emotional health issues that we find in our world. Christians and non-Christians alike experience physical illness – so you should not be surprised that the same is true of emotional and mental well-being.

These very existence of these two psalms – and others like them – point to the fact that God knows that his people will sometimes feel “downcast” and “disturbed”. Note that this Psalm was written for corporate worship. It was a “maskil”, i.e., a worship song, of the “sons of Korah.” These sons of Korah were those who were charged with the ministry of singing for the gathered worship of God’s people. In other words, it was written for believers. It is a song that is included in Scripture to connect with people like us, who believe in God and love God but are going through dark times.

This side of heaven, both Christian and non-Christian will deal with all sorts of issues related to mental health. In our LAC Guiding Statement, we declare that our vision is for each one who becomes a part of this church family to become complete in Christ. That means that we know that all of us have a lot of healing and growing to do to become complete. God plants churches like ours in this world both to give witness to him as well as to grow and find healing together. Psalm 42-43 is in the Bible because the way the psalmist felt is a normal part of a life in this world. The mental issues he struggled with do not constitute what life will be when Jesus finishes his work in this world – but it is a normal part of life this side of heaven

Something has happened over the past 40-50 years in the American church that has led to us thinking that, once we give our lives to Jesus, then “poof” – immediately – all mental struggles go away. But, let me tell you: When a church embraces that kind of thinking, then all who struggle inside the church will feel we have to hide things; i.e., We will pretend that we’re already complete. But, that’s not what Scripture teaches – not at all!

As Tsega Worku says to me, “It used to be that when people had emotional and mental issues, they first went to church to find help. Now, they first go to the therapist – and hide their challenges in their life-journey from their church.” I am praying that you will not feel that way about our church. We are all “pieces of work” – but we’re pieces of God’s work. I believe that a big part of God’s healing in our lives when we go through mental health issues will often include good Christ-centered therapy – and it might include the use of good meds too.

But, foundationally, the church is to be a family involved in life together in such a way that, as the Apostle Paul wrote, *We are to grow up together in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph 4:15b-16).*

Here’s what I think: **If we do not have people in our church and in our small groups who are wrestling with mental health issues** – indeed, if we do not confess to the times when we ourselves are “downcast and disturbed” – **then we have become a social club; not a church.** Jesus said he had come not to heal the healthy (meaning those who pretend they are like the religious leaders did). Jesus came to heal the sick (cf, **Mk 2:17**). And that includes all of us. And his promise to all of us is that he is in the process of healing what is broken – spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. His promise is this: What he has begun in us, he will finish.

As I was preparing this message, I was speaking with someone very, very close to me who really understands mental health struggles. I said to her, “I’ll be speaking about mental health issues in my next sermon. Is it OK if I speak with you about it now?” And she said, “Of course, it’s OK. I want to speak about it. I just wasn’t sure that you would want to.” Do you see the implications of her words? She had experienced what so many experience, i.e., that we should not talk about mental illness in church.

As you may know, Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church and his wife Kay have become leading spokespersons about the church as a place of healing for mental illness. This happened when, after years of their son Mark struggling with mental health issues in secrecy from his church family, he took his own life. The Warrens wrote, “*The biggest thing we can do as pastors and churches is to remove the stigma behind mental illness. We have to assure people that it’s not a sin to be sick. Your chemistry is not your character, and your illness is not your identity. We’re all broken.*”

Our Key Provision: God’s presence experienced among God’s people. *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. (42:1). I remember how I would... go to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise. (42:4).*

It’s clear that the most important part of the psalmist’s need was to experience the presence and restorative power of God in his life. His “blues-Psalms” begin with that in 42:1 and end with that in 43:3-5. So, when any kind of mental or emotional distress hits you, there is often wisdom and help to be found in good meds, in good counseling, in learning to have better eating habits and sleeping patterns, in finding some relief from traumatic situations, etc. If you have not found that kind of help, we want to help you find it. We have a **crisis intake number** you can call: **626.844.4794**. When you call that number, leave your name and contact information. One of our coordinators will get back to you and help you determine a next step, often one of finding a good counselor in our community or in our church counseling center.

But, as I said earlier -- **The foundational need of every human being is to be in a genuine and close relationship to God. The key to experiencing God on a regular basis is your life within your community of people of faith.** Do you believe that?

Note this: The Psalmist who wrote Psalms 42-43 did know God and still he went through dark times. So, let me tell you: Even for us as believers, when we go through dark times, the greatest need we have is to have the assurance that God is with us. We still live by faith; not yet by sight. This entire Psalm shows us how a man who loves God but feels that God is far away seeks to experience the reality of God in his heart again.

And **the key to him experiencing God on a regular basis was his worship life.** The Psalmist wrote this “blues-Psalm” when he was away from his home worshipping community. See **v.4**: *I remember how I would... go to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise.* Do you see it? He missed going to worship. He missed singing with God’s people. He missed praying with God’s people.

I know that, sometimes, when mental distress hits, you may feel you don’t have the energy to go to church or to show up at your small group. But, this may be the very thing you most need to do. I am convinced the key provision that forms the basis for mental healing is a growing experience of God’s presence, love and sufficiency. And, I believe Scripture teaches that the main place to have that happen as a way of life is your participation in your local church – 1) worshipping regularly with us, 2) being a part of a smaller community (i.e., a small group) and 3) finding a place to serve in your church family.

Do Something! – *Soul, why are you in turmoil? Hope in God! (42:5,1; 43:5)*

When I was having my conversation about mental illness a few days ago with the person close to me, I asked if there was any simple suggestion that she has found helpful over the years. She said, “Yes, when the darkness comes, my counsellor told me just to **do something**. Get out from under that blanket of darkness. So, I do. I go wash the dishes. I sing. I call a friend. Otherwise the darkness just seems to get darker.”

I read through these Psalms and I see the Psalmist “doing something” in the midst of his being downcast. What he did might be helpful to you too:

1. **Pray even when you don’t want to** – *I pour out my soul... Why have you forgotten me? (42:4,9)*

He’s honest enough to ask “why!” in his prayer – and, he did it not just once – but four times. This is evidence of a true and honest relationship. For him, prayer was not simply reciting prescribed words. No, this man knew God and he talked with God about what was on his heart.

Praying in the midst of a bout with mental distress is a lot like opening your eyes in the middle of the night. At first, you can’t see anything – but then your eyes begin to adjust. You begin – just begin – to see. **In dark**

times, people of faith learn to pray even when we don't feel like it. Just like our eyes adjust to the darkness when we wake up at night, when we fix our eyes on God we begin to see the light.

#2: Sing even when you don't feel like it. *At night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. (42:8)*

These are not joy-filled Psalms. The Psalmist did not yet feel joy. This is a blues-song, pleading song. It is a song "to the God of my life." That is, it's a song in which he is pleading for his life. He sang something like the spiritual, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows – but Jesus..."

This is something I have learned to do. I find that music is a gift from God. Songs engage our emotions. When you sing songs expressing what you believe about God – calling you to apply what you believe about God to your current experience -- you often find your heart being lifted out of the darkness and into the light.

#3: Speak truth to yourself that you might not want to hear. *You, God, are my stronghold... Why are you downcast, soul? Put your trust in God. (43:2,5)*

Of course, you must know what God's Word says to be true in order to do this. Throughout the song, the Psalmist takes the promises of God found in Scripture and speaks them to his inner being.

This Psalm is so real to life. The really remarkable thing is that at the end of the psalm, the Psalmist is trusting God – but he's not yet fully where he wants to be. He had been through waves of darkness before, so he knew another one might come again. The last words of the song are "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

#4: Affirm God loves you even when you don't feel it. *By day the LORD directs his steadfast love. (42:8)*

Even though the Psalmist says he felt as if God had forgotten him, he never stopped believing that God loves him, is with him and that God is absolutely in control over all his problems. His struggles were not over even at the end of the song. But, he did get to 43:3-4, when he began to find a breakthrough into the light. *Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to the place where you dwell. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight, O God, my God.*

That's what we're going to do right now, i.e., go to the altar of God as we go together to communion. We will remember the greatest demonstration of God's love to us in the history of the world...