

Tim Ward, Holy Trinity Hinckley, 25.2.07

Psalm 88 (depression)

If there's one thing about depression that just about everyone knows, it's this: telling a depressed person, "Oh, just snap out it!", doesn't work. Of course they want to snap out of it, but they just can't.

Depression is stubborn, and hard to shift.

And depression can strike anyone. One of the most famous Christian preachers of the 19th century was Charles Spurgeon - and he said of his own experience of depression: "I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for."

And Murray Williams, from our own church-family, who has been open about his depression, found these words in a poem which summed up how his depression felt:

"The darkness engulfs me, I no longer see
The light or the hope or the way to be free."

Depression is now diagnosed by doctors far more than it was even twenty years ago. Some estimates say that a third of all people visiting their GP have a depressive illness - whether they acknowledge it or not.

And I gather that anti-depressants are now prescribed by GPs in the UK more than any other single group of drugs.

Some of us here are suffering from depression right now. Others have had bouts of it in the past. Many more of us will experience it in the future - although we may find that impossible to imagine right now.

It's clear, from talking to people and reading books written by experts, that depression has several different causes. Many medics point to low levels of certain hormones in the brains of depressed people, and regard depression as if it were entirely a physical illness - like having a bad back, or an under-active thyroid gland. But in fact no one really knows the extent to which low levels of these hormones cause depression, or are a result of it.

In women, depression can be linked to child-birth, or to the menstrual cycle.

Depression can have external triggers - often some loss, whether in bereavement, or divorce.

It can also have triggers inside ourselves, such as an unexpressed anger, or feelings of helplessness.

And depression can run in families - but no one yet knows how much of it is inherited in our genes, and to what extent the experience of being brought up by a depressed parent can make a child more susceptible to depression in later life. Indeed, research increasingly suggests that certain experiences in childhood - whether

a one-off trauma or a pattern of negative parenting - can make someone more likely to suffer to depression.

The best guess is that for every depressed person, some mixture of these different causes is at work.

So depression is a real illness - like having flu is a real illness - but its causes are far more complicated than simply a virus.

Now interestingly the Bible doesn't have much to say about the causes of depression, so we're not going to spend our time sifting through them. Instead, in the Bible God gives us some profound perspectives born out of deep human experience of depression.

And for this, the obvious place to turn is the Psalms - so I suggest you turn with me now to Psalm 88.

Psalm 88 is one of a number of Psalms written by someone who was clearly suffering from depression.

See there in verse 1 - 'day and night I cry out to you'. That's probably a clue that this man can't sleep - and trouble going to sleep, and then waking again at 3 or 4 in the morning, is a regular symptom in depression.

In his 'crying out' there may be a hint, too, of tearfulness - and many people in depression weep and weep, for no apparent reason.

This Psalm-writer also feels overwhelmed: verse 3 - he can't do anything to help himself. Indeed, some writers describe much depression as a reaction to helplessness in a situation we want to change, but can't.

And he feels close to death - verse 3 again - and also in verses 10-12. Many people in severe depression feel suicidal - feeling: "I am worthless - the world would be better off without me." For many others, severe depression is a kind of emotional death - going beyond feeling low, to feeling nothing.

This Psalm-writer also feels cut off from God - like people who, he says in verse 5, "are cut off from your care".

And verse 14 too [READ].

Depression is an illness that perverts people's emotions, so it's not a surprise that for Christians it can feel as if it corrodes their relationship with God.

And then in verse 6, he says... [READ].

"Being in a pit", "in darkness" - these are the most common words I have heard people use to describe depression.

In particular, this man feels overwhelmed by God's anger - verse 7 [READ], and verse 16 [READ].

One person said to me: being Christian can actually make depression feel worse - because you feel guilty that you're not full of the joy that Christians are supposed to feel.

And one last thing to see in this Psalm - he feels repulsive, even to his family and friends - verse 8 [READ] - and, over the page, verse 18 [READ].

‘Smelly, dirty and awful’ - that’s how someone described to me their view of themselves in depression.

Sleepless, weeping, overwhelmed, close to death, cut off from God - even under God’s anger - in a pit, repulsive to the world. Here is a vivid self-description of a depressed man.

And what is he doing? He is talking to God.

In depression - indeed, when feeling bad in any way, the Christian can...

1. Tell God how you really feel.

That often begins when you tell yourself how you really feel - admit it.

If you are naturally a coper and a fighter - someone who prides themselves on dusting yourself off and getting on with life - it can be hard to admit how wretched you really feel.

But you can’t just pretend that feelings like this Psalmist had are going to go away just like that.

We also have to tell other people. I once went back to a new term at theological college with my arm in plaster. It was obvious what was wrong - the only embarrassment was admitting how I’d done it. (If

you must know, I fell from the top bunk of some bunk-beds, while trying to climb out of bed.)

But if you're depressed, people can't see it so easily - so you need to tell them. Of course you won't want to tell everyone - but as a Christian you should want to tell at least one or two Christian friends and leaders, who can support you and pray for you.

There are still some stigmas about mental illness in our society - but there should be none in the society of Christ - the Christian family.

And most importantly: tell God.

Someone told me that in their depression they stopped trying to pray at all. I would want to say, gently, that God gives us Psalms like this one to give us words so that we can keep talking to God, even when we have no words of our own.

The Psalms have helped many people in depression - not doing deep Bible-studies on them - maybe not even able to read a whole Psalm - just finding in them phrases that sum up how they felt.

The Psalms are so true to life. This one has been called the saddest Psalm of all - it has no up-beat ending - its final words are: 'darkness is my closest friend.'

God has given you words to say to him, even if that's the only thing you can say.

And in severe depression, when someone can't even open the Bible for themselves, God can give them a Christian friend, to read a Psalm to them.

Tell God how you really feel. But communication with God is two-way - so in depression you need also to...

2. Let God tell you the truth.

Roger Carswell is a well known Christian evangelist. He recently suffered from a serious depression. He has said that the one lesson he would want to pass on from his experience is this: “Your mind will tell you things that aren’t true.”

You see, depression tells you lies about yourself and God:

“Your life has no purpose. No one in the universe loves you. You are repulsive. A real Christian wouldn’t feel this way.”

These are lies - and whatever the causes of someone’s depression, they will surely want to let God remind them of his truth, pushing back at the malignant lies.

One person described this to me as ‘ministering the gospel to yourself’.

See how the Psalmist does it in Psalm 88, even in this blackest of Psalms.

First, he reminds himself who God is.

That’s there in the very first word of the Psalm: ‘Lord’.

It’s there again in verse 9 - ‘I call to you, Lord, every day’ - and in verse 13: ‘I cry to you for help, Lord’.

Do you see that ‘Lord’ there is in capital letters? That’s the way our English Bibles mark that the original Hebrew word is ‘Yahweh’.

And in the Old Testament ‘Yahweh’ is God’s most precious name. It means literally: ‘I am who I am’, or ‘I will be who I will be’, and it emphasises God’s faithfulness to his people. It’s linked with God’s covenant-promise to his people: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

When the Psalmist calls God, ‘Yahweh, Lord,’ he’s also talking to himself: “Remember who God is - he is the God who has united himself in love and faithfulness to his people for ever.”

And he also reminds himself what God does - verse 1 [READ]. He must have said that partly through gritted teeth, since he also felt abandoned by God.

But he tells himself that his feelings have not changed God - God has saved him in the past, and he will save him again in the future.

Too many Christians think:

“If I feel close to God, my faith must be healthy - and if I feel distant from God, then there must be something wrong with my faith.”

Now of course our feelings of faith can drift because of our own doing - say by stopping meeting with other Christians, or not reading Scripture.

But it’s also true that depression can come and steal away our feelings of faith.

After all, as an illness depression attacks and damages your emotions just as surely as cancer can attack and damage your liver.

The only positive thing the Psalmist can say is in his depression is: “Lord - faithful God - you are the God who saves me” - and to say that is, for him, immense faith.

Real Christian faith is not feeling the right thing - because in this world feelings are like the return on your investments - they can go down as well as up.

No, real Christian faith is resolving that your trust will be in the Lord God alone - whatever attacks may be launched against your feelings, in this fallen world.

One of the most successful treatments for depression is called ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’ (or CBT to its friends) - which helps depressed people replace negative thought-patterns with realistic and positive ones.

That’s really what this Psalm-writer is modelling for us here. The Christian who feels utterly unlovable and isolated can say to themselves: “there is an unchanging faithful Lord who created me with a purpose - who loves me - not because I’ve achieved anything - not because I’m especially lovely - but simply because he chose to love me.”

If someone else came and said that to you in your depression, it might seem insensitive. But it is something we can learn to say to ourselves - as God speaks his truth to us in his Word.

Of course depressed people should see their doctor, and take anti-depressants if they need them to fend off suicidal thoughts, or to be in a stable enough state to deal with the issues which their depression raises for them.

And they should seek counselling when depression brings to the surface issues from their past which still affect them.

But whatever eats away at our joy, and attacks our emotions - whether it be occasional lows, or major depression - these are things which God in his Word will help us work through, and address, and engage with.

Now, unlike this Psalmist, the Christian knows Jesus Christ.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, facing his own imminent death, Jesus cried out to God, overwhelmed by grief, knowing that he was choosing for God's anger to be poured out on him on the cross. He was surely echoing this Psalm.

In Jesus, the real God has experienced the depths of the pit with you.

And by going through death and bursting out the other side in resurrection, Jesus has defeated death and darkness.

And for all who hold on to him in trust - "Lord God, Lord God" - then whatever may attack their emotional life - there is the certain promise that one day God will wipe out from his world everything that assails his creatures in body and mind, wiping away every tear from their eyes.

Jesus cried out to God in anguish - and in his anguish he was faithful to God. So can we, telling our faithful Lord of our anguish.

And Jesus submitted faithfully to his Father. So can we, allowing God in his Word to speak his truth to his, clinging in trust to him, through what may feel like a long dark vale of tears.

“Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you.” That is real faith - because it is real trust in the Lord.