



Mental Health in the Bible

DANIEL J. SIMUNDSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The Bible is surely an important resource to which people of faith turn in their search for mental health. Those who are struggling with overwhelming emotional and spiritual burdens will open their Bibles, hoping to find some word that will ease their suffering, answer their doubts, remove their depression, bring security, and assure them that they are loved and accepted by God. Those of us who try to be comforters to those in mental torment also look for biblical words of assurance, positive statements about God and life and hope that can bring some change in those to whom we minister. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. To some, the biblical word only seems to add to their burden, reminding them of their inadequacy, guilt, powerlessness, shame, and mortality.

The Bible certainly speaks to issues of mental health, though the message may be indirect, appearing as part of a larger theological theme. One cannot assume a direct move from specific texts to a prescription for an individual's particular life situation. In this paper I will make several generalizations which arise from biblical study and which, in one way or another, speak to our concerns for mental health. Under "mental health" I mean to include (among other things) a consciousness of well-being, inward peace, and security; accepting and loving relationships with others; a sense that life has meaning; flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances; and the ability to put the past and future in perspective so that life can be lived fully in the present. Mental health, like mental illness, is a relative thing. Most of us live our lives along a spectrum somewhere between the extremes of health and illness.

1. The condition of "mental health" is the preferred state.

According to the Bible, God's intention for the world is that we live in peace and health and wholeness with ourselves, God, other humans, and the whole creation. Suffering of any kind (and mental, emotional, spiritual torment can be the most awful kind of suffering) is a negative, a problem, not the way things should be, not what God wants for us. To be sure, something has gone wrong with the creation so that suffering and brokenness

entered into the beautiful world that God had made. But that is not the way it will always be. God is the healer who works to mend what is broken, bind up the wounds, bring hope out of despair, and reconcile shattered relationships. God works in us for healing, as individuals and as societies. Jesus came to heal the spirit and the emotions as well as the physical illnesses of the hurting persons he encountered. And so God's intention is always toward our health and well-being at all levels of our existence.

This means that we ought not be satisfied with the suffering of the present world in any form. This means that we are called to work with God to find ways to relieve suffering, whether it be physical, spiritual, or mental.

2. How one reads the Bible can contribute to the problem (or to the solution).

Sometimes, in our efforts to find comfort for ourselves or in order to speak a helpful word to others, we quote biblical passages which don't seem to work a positive response. Perhaps someone has fixated on a different word from Scripture so that the word we are presenting is drowned out by some other message. Perhaps a person's experience has so distorted his or her world view that the positive message of a loving God who comes to heal cannot break through. What some hear when they read the Bible has been so conditioned by their experience that the biblical message itself becomes part of the problem, providing further evidence of what terrible persons they are.

There are many biblical passages in both the Old and New Testaments which speak of a judging God who will not tolerate sinful behavior and will finally punish us in a way that is appropriate for such terrible sinners. Our theology reminds us that we are corrupt human beings, incapable of making good choices, deserving of any punishment that God deems appropriate. People who are prone to think of themselves as useless, unworthy, shameful, and guilty will find ample biblical material to affirm that assessment. Every pastor has had to deal (probably more than once) with the person who is convinced that she or he has committed the unforgivable sin (usually, when more fully discussed, it will turn out to be some sort of sexual indiscretion). Our efforts at theodicy (trying to show that God is just, even in the face of the terrible things that happen in the world) usually end up blaming human beings for their suffering. When Jesus teaches that the emotions of hostility and lust are the equivalent of murder and adultery (Matt 5:21-28), the scrupulous reader of the text must either deny such emotions or feel guilty and incapable of acceptable Christian behavior. Mental hospitals have often admitted self-maimed persons who have quite literally accepted Jesus' word that "it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Matt 5:29b). I still have a vivid impression in my memory of an encounter almost thirty years ago with a young mother who, like Abraham, had heard God tell her to kill her child. Unfortunately, unlike Abraham, God did not tell her to stop.

For one who is already mentally disturbed, the Bible can contribute to the problem. It is hard to proclaim the gospel of love and acceptance by God, regardless of past sins or distorted theologies, when one is caught in a living hell where everyone and everything is an enemy. Even the "good" passages about God's love can be twisted into another word of judgment

(e.g., "I'm unworthy of such love," or "I must really be bad because I can't even believe that," or "If that's really true, God would not let me suffer like this if I didn't deserve it").

It may be that we first need to work out the human relationships before our proclamation of the gospel will do any good, before it can be heard in an undistorted way. Psychotherapy or some other professional way of tending to one's illness may be necessary before the biblical word can become gospel. We pastors and counselors may teach more by our quiet acceptance of the one suffering mental distress than by all our fine biblical quotes and theological

argumentation for a kind and loving God. After some of the debris that has obstructed the reception of the healing word has been cleared away, then the Bible can again serve a positive function as a resource toward further growth and healing. Then people can begin to hear the wonderful words of forgiveness for the past, of meaningful and loving relationships in the present, and of hope for the future—all of which are important ingredients for ongoing mental health.

3. Emotional/spiritual struggles can be positive steps on the pathway toward mental health.

Though suffering of any kind is not to be desired or sought, though health is always preferable to illness, times of mental anguish may serve a necessary function for us. They may be constructive events in our lives which we cannot avoid if growth is to occur and healing is to be achieved. Some popularized religions promise too much too soon—happiness without struggle, Easter without Good Friday; they are simply incapable of dealing with the depth of suffering with which many must contend. Growth can be painful. Ask the seminarian who is struggling with intellectual challenges to long-held, but previously unexamined, beliefs. Ask the person who has been through an extensive round of psychotherapy. Ask the new widow how hard it is to work through the pain of the grief process.

And so, too, our biblical ancestors went through their times of torment on the way to fuller understanding of God and themselves. Jacob's inner and outer conflicts finally came to ahead as he wrestled with God along the bank of the Jabbok (Gen 32). Something crucial happened there. Jacob had striven with God and with humans and had prevailed (Gen 32:28b). He became a new person, even with a new name—Israel (Gen 32:27-28). And so his battle within himself, with God, with Esau and Laban and others in his family led to a positive outcome. But even here there would be lingering scars—his thigh was put out of joint, and from then on he would walk with a limp (Gen 32:25, 31-32). In this world at least, the healing (physical or mental) may not be complete—the scars of earlier pain and suffering will not be completely removed.

Throughout the centuries believers have had their own exodus and exile experiences, drawing analogies with those ancients who struggled through the arid, lonely, inhospitable wilderness, learning and refining their faith along the way to the Promised Land. The process of moving from lament to praise in the psalms is a reminder that (a) descent into the depths may be necessary before the hopeful word can be heard and (b) there truly is hope at the end because God will not abandon us forever in our suffering.

Job, too, learned this lesson, struggling mightily with his understanding of God in the light of his terrible life experiences. He tried too soon to submit to God (Job 1:21; 2:10) in the hope that he could avoid the terror of challenging God's justice. But Job found he could not short-cut the road to renewed mental and spiritual well-being. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Surely, it seems, there must be some better way to save humanity than through humiliation and death on the cross. Jesus' followers hoped so. Even Jesus, as he struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, would have welcomed some other route. Paul's struggle with his "thorn in the flesh," whatever it may have been, certainly caused him anguish and, in the end, made him more appreciative of God's power to accomplish God's purposes, even through human weakness (2 Cor 12:7-10).

Mental and spiritual torment can be a time of growth, a time when our deepest anxieties and fears can no longer be suppressed but are forced into the open where they must be faced. This can be a constructive time of reorientation, leading to a new life that is fuller than it had ever been. Of course, such moments of crisis can also lead to negative results and further deterioration—as in the case of Saul, the first king of Israel.

4. Mental health is a corporate, not only an individual, matter.

Human beings, according to the biblical witness, do not live in isolation. We are part of larger communities, including the living, those long dead, and those who will come after us. It is impossible to speak of a person's mental health or illness without regard to the community from which one comes and in which one presently lives.

We are all born into a world broken by sin. It goes all the way back to the first human beings. No one is perfect. Our inability to love as we ought, our selfish preoccupation with self, our fears and insecurities and anger have had their effects on those around us, particularly our family. And we, too, have been shaped by the family in which we were born. The sins of the parents are truly passed on to the third and fourth generations, thus creating a seemingly endless cycle from which it is virtually impossible to extricate ourselves. I have been influenced by great-grandparents who died in a distant country before I was even born. Further, I have already influenced my own grandchildren as yet unborn. We are all in this together. The stories of Genesis show how the problems of one generation are passed on to the next—the rejections of Ishmael and Hagar by Abraham and Sarah, the favoritism of Isaac for Esau and Rebekah for Jacob, Jacob's preference for Rachel and her children (Joseph and Benjamin) over Leah and her children. Similar examples of the corporate, familial nature of mental health and illness can be seen in the stories of David and his family. An individual can hardly emerge in a state of glowing mental health from such unhealthy family structures.

And so it is true in our day, as we trace the alcoholic abuse, sexual abuse, and criminality that persist from generation to generation in certain families. Many psychotherapists will not treat a person with emotional problems unless all available members of the family agree to participate in the therapy. No longer can one think of the "sick one" in a family without paying attention to the way the whole system of the family organizes itself.

The same can be said for other "systems," such as churches, businesses, fraternal organizations, and government at its various levels.

Further, it is important to note that in certain times and places, it is virtually impossible for God's faithful people to have a sense of well-being, security, happiness, and hope (at least from an earthly perspective). Amos, Jeremiah, and the other pre-exilic prophets were not happy, well-adjusted people. They were out of step with the society in which they lived, critical of abuses of power and violations of God's law which others were perfectly willing to tolerate. Jeremiah was a terribly unhappy person, alienated from other people because he was not willing or able to compromise God's clear word to him. Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe and companion, also shared in Jeremiah's suffering and pain. When he complained to God about his situation, God responded that this is a time of breaking down and plucking up. In such a time, how can you possibly ask for relief from suffering (Jer 45)? The only way to find relief would be to deny the

reality of the times. Since creative, sensitive, God-fearing people like Jeremiah or Baruch could not do that, their mental anguish was even worse than that of the so-called “normal” people of the society.

We are related to one another. We sometimes must bear the sins of others, as they also bear ours. The one who seems to be mentally ill may in fact be more perceptive, more involved in struggle with God’s call, than other seemingly well-adjusted individuals.

5. Human beings should be understood as integrated persons in which body, mind, and soul are intimately interconnected.

Just as we cannot study the mental health of an individual apart from that person’s place within a larger community of family and society, so we cannot study mental health in isolation from physical and spiritual health. When suffering comes, it affects all parts of our humanness, wherever the suffering originates. Job’s first round of suffering involved the loss of physical possessions and grief over the loss of his children. That is, the first problem was the mental torment of loss and grief. But soon physical suffering followed. And then came the suffering of the soul, the loss of a simple faith that had always served him well, the intrusion of doubts that God was still close and caring and just. One kind of suffering leads to another. You could start with pain in any area and soon would have symptoms in all of them. Mind, body, and spirit are connected in ways that we do not even understand. But the Bible reminds us. And modern psychology is catching up with this ancient truth that had been set aside by persistent efforts to separate mind and body.

The language of the psalms continually mixes images of physical, mental, and spiritual torment. “When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (Ps 32:3-4). “O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger, nor chasten me in thy wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is sorely troubled. But thou, O Lord—how long?” (Ps 6:1-3). “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast; my strength is

dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death” (Ps 22:14-15).

6. Mental illness cannot be equated with sin, and mental health is not the same as salvation.

Psychology can be a great help to ministry. But psychology is not the same as theology, and the categories of the one cannot be equated with those of the other. In an effort to simplify the complexities of human existence and out of a strong desire to ease the suffering caused by mental and emotional torment, some pastoral comforters have tended to psychologize our theology. They have concluded that most of the suffering of the world can be identified as human problems that we humans can fix.

It may well be true that some mental illness is a manifestation of sinful human nature. It is also true that mental health is desirable, something that God wants for us and for which God is working, both within this world and in the world to come. But how much is possible? What can

be “fixed” by human effort? Not all the guilt can be removed by better therapy. No amount of treatment by doctors, drugs, electric shock, or group therapy can turn us finally into loving human beings who act only out of concern for the other. The effects of sin cannot be completely removed, though to a greater or lesser degree, they can be modified and their impact ameliorated.

There is sin and guilt and alienation and loneliness that is so profound that no human efforts can bring healing. As with our hopes for physical healing in this life, we will often be disappointed in our longing for emotional, spiritual healing. To be sure, God does break into the world. There are healings that remind us of God’s intention for us and of our hope for the fullness and wholeness that is possible in the life to come. As Christians, we must include an eschatological hope in our discussion of mental health. What we really need is “salvation,” something that reaches beyond the promises of this world. And salvation is possible even for those of us whose childhood experiences or present circumstances make it very difficult to achieve mental health in this life. And all of us who are neither mentally ill nor shining examples of mental health know that we too have been saved because God’s grace takes us as we are. That is what salvation is all about.

7. A few more practical points (especially for would-be comforters) follow from what we have been saying.

The biblical lament tradition can be a great help to us as we struggle with spiritual, emotional, and physical problems. These biblical resources give us permission to open up and admit our inner turmoil. They help remove barriers of isolation. We are in good company with other sufferers of past and present, even those saints who left us their words in the Bible. Also, God has promised to hear our prayer, even though it be angry, impertinent, confused, full of doubt and disbelief. Many people in mental torment have been relieved to know that there was a word for them in the Bible, a word that met them where they were on their spiritual pilgrimage and did not demand that they already be in a state of peaceful well-being before it was appropriate to offer a prayer to God.

If it is true that sometimes we must go through our own time of “exile” in order to reconstruct our lives, if sin is real and good therapy is not enough

to deal with real guilt, then perhaps we need to remind ourselves that our primary motive for ministering to sufferers may not be to make people happy, comfortable, and feeling better. Such may be our ultimate goal for them, but they may need to feel worse before they can feel better. Or, they may need to feel worse in order to come to awareness of how much pain they are bringing to others. In our rush to preach the gospel, we must be aware of the function of the law.

Our desire for mental health (and/or physical health) can become idolatry if it becomes an all-consuming goal on the earthly level. It may reveal a total absorption with self. Further, in this world of sin, it may simply be unattainable. To pretend that we can achieve it in its fullness, this side of the eschaton, is to claim too much for human effort and may set us up for unrealistic hopes and great disillusionment.

We do not need to wait to be completely healthy in order to live lives of love and service to God and other human beings. To be sure, we are limited by our imperfections, our inability to relate, our confusion of our own needs with those of the person to whom we minister. This is an

imperfect world. God knows that and does not expect us to be more than we are. The biblical story contains a long history of God's managing to work out God's will even through sinful humanity. Those Old Testament characters remained sinners even after they came through their struggles with renewed faith. The same was true of those disciples who were called by Jesus. And Paul's ministry was certainly effective in spite of his "thorn in the flesh." We are called to go forward, serving and praising God with whatever gifts God has given us. God can use us, weaknesses and all, and we will find meaning and fulfillment as God speaks to others through our feeble and imperfect efforts.