

We were talking last week about how the psalms were a prayer book for Jews and for Christians. And as these prayers were meant to be sung, they were also a hymnbook. But that’s not all. Whether I read or pray or sing my way through the psalms, I come to the realization that they also can serve as a different kind of book, what you might call a spiritual diagnostic manual, a sort of DSM-5 for the soul.

Long before the fields of psychology and psychiatry were established we had the psalms to tell us what was wrong with us, to help us to analyze our feelings and seek help for our life problems. For example, Psalm 42 captures many of the symptoms of major depression:

*#1 Restlessness:* “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?”;

*#2 Persistent sad mood:* “my tears have been my food day and night”;

*#3 Feelings of hopelessness:* “while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”;

*#4 Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities:* “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving”;

*#5 Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down":* “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?”;

*#6 Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness:* “I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?”

*#7 Thoughts of death or suicide:* “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts; all your waves and billows have gone over me”;

*#8 Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and pain for which no other*

*cause can be diagnosed.* “As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’” [symptoms from [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)]

As you can see, when it comes to depression, the author of this psalm knew what he was talking about. It’s even more convincing in the original Hebrew. The word here for soul is *nefesh*, which is more literally translated as “life force.” I think that captures it very well, for when we are depressed, our *life force* is cast down. And it isn’t just “disquieted” within us, either. The Hebrew word is a better one. It means “dissolved” or “melted.” The thing about depression is that you often feel empty inside. Your soul might as well have dissolved or melted away.

People often describe the onset of depression as a descent into darkness. That’s what the psalm is getting at when it talks about the “deep,” that primordial darkness, like the one at the very beginning, a darkness so dark that no light could break in because it hadn’t been created yet.

Another way to describe it is to say that depression is like drowning. The Hebrew word for cataracts is literally a pipe or gutter or jet of water, so imagine the psalmist standing on the Oroville Dam spillway as it was beginning to fail or on a surfboard at Mavericks as he is going “over the falls.”

The psalms are pretty darned good at depicting depression, but what I want to know is can they deliver us from it? Not just by praying or singing the words, I’m afraid. But if you look closely at Psalm 42, you will find there some good guidance for what to do. The first good thing that the psalmist did was to acknowledge that he was depressed. That isn’t so easy to do. Christians are supposed to have the joy of Jesus, so we tend to cover up our sadness. We just keep coming to church, going with the throng, leading them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving. We put on our smiley face to make it through another Sunday so we can get through another week.

But the psalmist has reached a point where he just can't do that. He can't "fake it 'til he makes it" anymore. Now his problem is not that he is so hungry, so thirsty for God. We all are. As long as we are in this life, we may have tasted God, but we're still hungry. We may have taken a sip of salvation, but we're still thirsty. That's just how it is. No, his problem is that he can no longer remember the taste. All he can remember is the hunger.

So he pours out his soul to God. If we can summon up the courage to acknowledge to ourselves that we are depressed, the next best thing we can do is tell God about it. Not that God doesn't already know. It's that by telling the truth to God, we can externalize our problem. We get it outside of our soul, and by doing that, we begin to lessen the power it has over us. We hold it out at arm's length where we can look at it, interrogate it, so that maybe we can understand it better. If we can't change the situation, maybe we can change the way we think about it.

In the process of trying to understand, the psalmist asks, “why?” But notice that he isn’t asking God. He’s asking his own soul. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” Do you think he somehow knows that he already has the answer to that question? The answer is within, but even so, he’s going to need some help getting at it.

Today, we know about the mind-body connection, and so we might go to a medical doctor to see if there is an underlying health condition that is causing our soul to be cast down. But medical doctors don’t have all the answers, either, so we may need to go to a counselor or therapist who is trained to help us get at the truth that is buried deep inside us.

The truth about ourselves is that no matter how dead we might feel now, we haven’t always felt this way. We haven’t always wondered where God was or if God was. The psalms says, remember what God did in the land of Jordan and on Mount Hermon?

Unfortunately, people who struggle with depression often can't remember the good that God has done. Or if they do remember, it no longer matters to them. And that's where the community comes in to remind them. Now that isn't to say that our job is to go around telling people that they shouldn't be depressed because they really are blessed. It's not helpful at all to try to guilt them into agreeing that God is good...all the time. In fact, it's usually hurtful.

No, it's enough of a job to believe it ourselves. The truth is that our faith won't be enough. We're going to need a lot of grace if we are going to be with someone who is struggling with depression. We're going to need the constant assurance that God loves us in order to keep bringing love to a person who is convinced that they are unlovable. The last thing we should say to them is "where is your God?" The last thing we want to do is imply that all they need is more faith, that if they would just pray harder, they would feel better. Or if they just ate right or exercised more or read this book or tried this program, they could get a handle on their problem.

Parker Palmer tells the story of his own depression and about some of his well-meaning friends and colleagues who tried to help him. But one friend, Bill, didn't try to fix him. He just asked permission to visit. He would drop by every afternoon, sit Parker down in a chair, kneel in front of him, and take off Parker's shoes and socks and massage his feet. Parker said that Bill found the one place on his body where he could still experience feeling and some connection to the human race. During his visits, Bill didn't say many words, but his presence said enough. [*Let Your Life Speak*, 63-64]

What Bill did is what God is doing in Psalm 42. God isn't doing the talking; God is doing the listening. Love doesn't make long speeches. Love doesn't have a quick fix. All love does is show up and listen. And when our friend says to God, "Why have you forgotten me?" our quiet presence will be God saying, "Dear one, it's your illness that has made you forget how much I love you, but I promise that I will never, ever forsake you."

We have to take it from Bill and not wait for someone who is depressed to invite us into their darkness. We just have to show up. Sadie Freeman was confirmed a few weeks ago and shared with us an amazing testimony to the healing power of this church as a group of people who show up for each other. In her wise-beyond-her-years witness, she reminded us that we are a part of a bigger story. When we are so cast down that we can't remember who we are, sometimes the thing that will save us is having a community of faith that will keep showing up and reminding us whose we are.

As anyone who has a loved someone who is struggling with depression will tell you, none of this is easy. But the psalms can give us insight into what our loved one is going through and give us hope. The psalm ends with a mantra: "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." The author keeps repeating it because he wants to believe it, but I'm not sure he's there yet. When I was having seizures and couldn't find a drug to stop them, this was my mantra, too. I said it even when I couldn't believe it. I

never prayed for a cure, only for hope. But, as Paul reminds us, hope is not about what we can see. Hope is about what we cannot see.

[Romans 8:24-25] The blessed thing is that we can see each other, and by God's grace, that will be enough.