

INTRODUCTION

'How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?'
(Psalm 13:2)

I was thirteen. I had prayed the 'sinner's prayer' asking Jesus into my life at a Scripture Union camp a couple of years before, although I am not sure how real my faith actually was. As a family, we were on a camping holiday in France. It was a humid night and a thunderstorm was brewing. I couldn't get to sleep. A thought came into my head: What would happen if I said a satanic prayer? I am not too sure where this idea came from. I had read the book *From Witchcraft to Christ*. Perhaps that was the root of my thinking. The author of that book had done some 'miraculous' things when she had been a witch.

I didn't want to give in to the temptation. I resisted and resisted, hoping to fall asleep, but the humidity kept me awake and my curiosity was immense. Eventually I did give in. I don't remember what I prayed, and I don't like to think about it. When nothing magical happened,

I acknowledged to God that I had been a fool. However, later that evening the storm erupted. As the lightning flashed and thunder crashed, I feared that God was expressing His rage at what I had done. I was very worried. The next morning, I asked my mother if God forgives everything we confess, and she promised me that He did. I didn't think of that incident for years, but it later came back to haunt me.

In my very late teens and early twenties, I came across verses about the unforgiveable sin and the warning passages in the book of Hebrews about falling away. These warning passages became an obsession for me. I wondered how my dabbling with satanism as a thirteen-year-old could have been anything other than an irrevocable falling away. I thought about this all the time. I consulted Bible commentary after commentary looking for reassurance but I could not shake off the fear. Most of the time I functioned fairly normally. I came across as a happy person, but there was always insecurity and at times my anxieties would flair up. I went through at least one episode of depression where my appetite disappeared, my mood was desperately low, and I would wake early in the morning unable to sleep again. These fears lasted all through my twenties. The nature of my anxieties changed as I approached thirty. As well as my fear of being beyond God's forgiveness, I began to struggle to keep certain thoughts out of my mind. These thoughts could be very dark and disturbing. I had little rituals to help deal with them, like holding my thumb underneath my ring finger, as a physical gesture to say, 'I don't like this thought that I fear I am going to give in to.' I would also mumble under my breath. I remember

going to a church service and the friend sitting behind me commenting on how fidgety I was. I was wrestling so hard not to give in to these dark thoughts that it even showed in my bodily posture. It was embarrassing to try and explain to anyone what was going on in my mind. Even now I can see how odd this must have seemed.

A few years after these intrusive thoughts had begun to trouble me we were on a short holiday in Tipperary. My parents, my sister's family and my brother's family were there too. One night, the adults were sitting around the table after the meal when my mother mentioned that my dad's mother had struggled with debilitating mental illness and had spent many years in care. It wasn't that this had been kept a secret, but I never remember it being mentioned before. A light went on in my head: Could it be that these intrusive thoughts that I battle to keep out of my head aren't simply a case of me being silly? Maybe I have inherited a predisposition to anxiety. Maybe there is some medical root to what I am suffering.

I didn't go to the doctor straight away but, at a time when my thoughts were unmanageable, I did eventually go. In God's kindness, there happened to be a couple of general practitioners and a psychiatrist in the church I was pastoring. Rosie, who could see that I was struggling, gave me some tablets and arranged for Stephen, the psychiatrist, to visit me at home.

That night Stephen turned up at our house. He heard what I was saying about my disturbing thoughts and the little rituals I had to deal with them, and he immediately diagnosed the problem. He described my thoughts as being ridiculous, resistant, repetitive and repulsive to me. That is exactly what they were. He said that I was

suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). I would never have guessed that because, like many people, I thought OCD was always about cleaning things whereas I am an untidy person. Stephen told me to take two months off work, prescribed some medication and recommended that I take a course in cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

My OCD became much more manageable over the following years. I know that some of my friends have had difficulty connecting with their cognitive behaviour therapist, but mine was brilliant. I felt completely free to talk to her, even about things that were deeply embarrassing. CBT taught me how to understand my thoughts, and I kept on taking my tablets every day. Things were good.

Coming up to Christmas 2017 a number of changes in my life increased my stress levels. My wife, Caroline, had started part-time work outside of the home and I was trying to figure out the balance between family responsibilities and work. There were also some changes taking place in my work with the church. Then there was the fact that I had fallen behind in taking my tablets because I had not got around to renewing my prescription.

One Friday evening I was with my wife and kids, and I started to become very anxious. Old fears of being unforgivable re-emerged. I quietly slipped upstairs and got into bed, where I began to shake with nerves. I was having some sort of breakdown. For a week I was in a bad way and stayed in bed. I was prescribed a lot of sedatives, and these helped. After a couple of weeks, I was feeling better again. It seemed as if the episode was over. Then

one day a darkness came over me. For the next number of weeks, I was deeply depressed and anxious. My thoughts were very troubled. I was racked with doubt. I not only wondered if God loved me, I wondered if He even existed. I had little appetite and lost a good amount of weight. I could get to sleep, but I would wake early in the morning with my feet dripping with sweat. (I am not sure why it was my feet that sweated so much!) The Irish rugby team were on their way to winning the Grand Slam, yet I only watched the matches to be with my son and act as if things were normal. In truth I couldn't enjoy anything. This depression was unlike any other episode that I had had and I was scared that it would never lift. I feared that life would always be this way. Thankfully, it did lift, although I persisted with a mildly low mood for a long time afterwards.

Things are good now, though I sometimes still wake up in a low mood. I suspect there may well be further instances of depression and anxiety in the future. Yet I am sure I will get through them, as I got through on previous occasions. In some ways, getting through the last episode of depression and anxiety has strengthened me.

I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT GOD IS WITH YOU

In this book, I want to draw on my own experiences and thoughts on issues related to depression and anxiety. I am coming from an evangelical Christian perspective and I want to show you how the good news about Jesus is good news for your mental health. I want to do something to take away the stigma and misunderstanding that surrounds mental illness, particularly in church circles. There is also a chapter for those of you seeking to help

people in your church or family who struggle with depression and anxiety.

My hope is that, as you read this short book, your confidence in the kindness of God will grow, and you will experience the truth that ‘the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit’ (Ps. 34:18).



Let’s pray to the Father:

‘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?’ (Ps. 13:1-2). Father, my thoughts trouble me and I feel no joy. Help me, please. I am anxious and losing hope. Please show me the way out of this dark tunnel, for I can’t see any light. You are my rock and my refuge to whom I can always go for comfort and rest. (Ps. 71:3). Amen.



1

WHY DO PEOPLE STRUGGLE WITH DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

*'Everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be
needful that He withholds.'*
(John Newton)

If I was to think of why I struggle with depression and anxiety, I might come up with a number of factors and causes. There were my terrible fears that I was beyond the reach of God. There was also the possibility of a hereditary factor – after all, my grandmother suffered with depression and anxiety. Perhaps a traumatic incident of bullying in my first year as a boarder in school contributed to my sense of anxiety. What about the loneliness that I experienced when I finished as a boarder and later when I began to work in churches? At the time of my breakdown, I was under pressure balancing work and home life. All these factors and more may have contributed to my mental health problems.

1. Quoted in Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 2013), p. 266.

I want to suggest that all these factors have a shared root: the fact that we live in a fallen world! ‘The Fall’ describes how the first humans, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God and, as a result of God’s subsequent judgement, we now live subject to sickness, sin, decay, hostility, loneliness and death. This judgement on human rebellion is called ‘the Curse’.

WHAT ARE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

Before I show you how the Fall and the Curse cause depression and anxiety, I need to explain what depression and anxiety actually are. After all, we all go through days when we are less positive about life than others, and every day there are things that we can feel worried about. Depression involves a persisting low mood. Depressed people feel an almost constant state of sadness. The depressed person no longer enjoys activities that used to bring them pleasure. You may not be suicidal, but you don’t really want to be living. Your thoughts are generally gloomy, and you may be experiencing changes in appetite and sleep patterns. If this goes on for more than two weeks, it’s generally considered a depressive episode.

The issues can be similar with anxiety. Changes in sleeping and eating patterns may be evident. Your life is dominated by worries and you might struggle with disturbing thoughts. Your fears may seem unrealistic to others. Your worry is out of proportion. You are pessimistic about the future. You tend to overestimate the sense of threat and underestimate your ability to cope. Your anxiety could be a temporary reaction to external stresses, or you could be struggling with an

anxiety disorder. Anxiety and depression are often interrelated.

HOW ARE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY CAUSED BY THE FALL AND THE CURSE?

God had told Adam that if he and Eve rebelled against His loving rule, they would die. Adam and Eve did rebel. They no longer wanted to live under God's rule, and death entered the human experience. We now have mortal bodies that are subject to sickness and decay. Every part of our body is affected, including our brains. Our brains no longer function perfectly. Mental illness, like physical illness, is a part of the common lot of humankind.

Besides affecting our bodies and minds, the Fall and the Curse also affect us spiritually. Humankind is now born with what is called a sinful nature. This means that we have a natural tendency towards self-centredness and a natural hostility towards living under the loving rule of God. We also have a hostility towards other people, and so we don't live in harmony. This is seen in the life of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was jealous of Abel and murdered him. A big factor in our depression and anxiety is the hurt that other people do to us. They may not murder us, but they can be less than loving. Many victims of abuse struggle with mental health issues. Difficult marriages or family relations can be a huge source of pressure. People carry the wounds caused by an unloving parent, a harsh teacher or a school bully. I have a friend whose mother used to wake her in the middle of the night in order to tell her that she was worthless. This contributed to mental health problems

later in her life. Sometimes adverse reactions to the hurt caused by others don't surface until years after the events that wounded so deeply. King David knew what it felt like to feel worn down by other people. He wrote: 'My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes' (Ps. 6:7).

We are not simply the victims of other people's sinful nature. We are the victims of our own sinful hearts and foolish choices. For example, we struggle with anger when we don't get our way. Uncontrolled anger has been shown to set a person up for stress, depression, anxiety and even heart attacks. 'A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones' (Prov. 14:30). Of course, not all anger is condemned in the Bible; there is something called righteous anger. We should be angered when we witness cruelty and injustice. Most of my anger is anything but righteous. My anger is generally selfish and ignoble. We can't deal with anger on our own, so God has given His people the Holy Spirit who produces His fruit in our lives, which includes self-control (Gal. 5:23).

Bitterness also eats us up emotionally, like an acid destroying its own container. If you hold grudges against people, it will make you miserable. This is one of the beautiful things about the Christian gospel. God sent His Son to die for wicked people, so that our sins can be forgiven. As forgiven people, we are to forgive others. Part of my friend Andy's depression has roots in the hurt caused by a school bully. His psychiatrist had him fill out a forgiveness worksheet. I asked him, 'Do you think you could have forgiven him without your faith?' 'No', he immediately replied. 'I wouldn't have wanted to

forgive him.’ He was honest enough to admit that some of the bitterness still lives with him, but he knows that he has been called to let it go. This takes time. I am not saying that only Christians practise forgiveness but the good news about Jesus is the motivation to practise it and we are promised God’s power to enable us in this most difficult of tasks. Letting go of bitterness is very good for your mental health. If you are bitter, you will hurt no one more than yourself.

God may cause us to feel sorrow and restlessness when we stray from Him as a means to bring us home. When King David committed adultery and then arranged matters so that the woman’s husband was killed, he refused to face up to what he had done. God loved him too much to let him go on like this. David says of that time of denial, ‘When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long ... 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’ (Ps. 32:3-5). When I pray with people for physical and emotional healing, I allow for a time of silence where we can confess our sin. However, being depressed and anxious does not necessarily mean we have committed some particular sin to cause it. If God is using this pain to call you back to Himself, He will make that clear. Never assume that your depression and anxiety is caused by some unconfessed sin. Never accuse someone who is depressed or anxious of having done something wrong to bring about their pain. There are many other reasons why people struggle with anxiety and depression.

One of the results of the Fall and the Curse is that work is difficult. You may be over-worked and under-rested. In the Old Testament, when the prophet Elijah became weary and despondent, God saw that what he needed was food and rest (1 Kings 19:4-5, 7). I have noticed that many depressed and anxious people have an exaggerated sense of responsibility that can drive them mercilessly. They blame themselves for everything that goes wrong and feel the need for everything to go right. God calls us to rest and trust that He is in control.

The Fall and Curse means that we all will die. The loss of those we love can be very difficult. Grief is a normal and healthy reaction to loss. However, it can become debilitating. I knew a man who died not long after his wife. I couldn't help wondering if he actually died of a broken heart. Similarly, I remember an elderly woman who experienced debilitating mental health after the death of her brother. God wants us to lean on Him in our grief, as He promises to be with us while we travel through the valley of death (Ps. 23:4).

Then there is the problem of our own death. Most of us find ageing difficult. Fear of dying can begin long before old age. The hard truth is that we all will die. That thought can be very disturbing. However, the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus gives us hope in the face of our own mortality. Jesus has defeated death. He now offers people eternal life. Though we have to live in this fallen world now, when we die, our suffering and pain will be over. Jesus wants to free us from the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). In God's new heaven and new earth there will be no more Curse and no more tears (Rev. 21:4, 22:3).

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, struggled with bouts of deep anxiety and depression. He had a sensitive temperament, a difficult relationship with his father and he faced fierce opposition. At one stage he felt responsible for the fact that some of his followers were dying for their faith, while he lay safely in his bed. However, while outward events affected him, the very nature of 'the dark night of the soul' is that it sometimes appears without any obvious cause. There may seem to be little explanation as to why we can cope with some pressures well at one time, and then at other times we fall apart. My wife, Caroline, often asks what has changed in my life when my anxieties begin to get out of control. While sometimes I can see certain factors at work, other times I can think of nothing that has caused the deterioration.

CONCLUSION

If you are struggling with depression and anxiety, can you pinpoint some of the factors that may contribute to it? How was your life when you were growing up? What was your relationship with your parents or guardians like? Are there other members of your family who struggle with their mental health? Could you have a hereditary predisposition? Is life very stressful for you?

Most likely there will be many factors contributing to your depression and anxiety, some of which you have not even considered. Since there can be a number of factors, you should seek a number of 'helps' in dealing with it. You may need some combination of rest, medical help, counselling and spiritual guidance. While there are many factors at work causing your struggles with

mental health, all these are rooted in the fact that we live in a fallen world that is subject to sin, decay, isolation and death. I heard one preacher say that since he had become a Christian he had not suffered so much as a cold. He obviously had a good immune system, but terrible theology. To deny that the Christian suffers from physical and mental brokenness in this life is to misunderstand the nature of living in a fallen world.

Thankfully the Fall and the Curse were not the last Word of God for humankind. The ultimate hope for the depressed Christian is that we are heading to a future where there will be no more tears. However, our hope does not simply lie beyond this life. Even now, we have a Heavenly Father who will never forsake us even though we have often turned our backs on Him. The Fall and Curse may lie behind all our depression and anxiety, but so does God. After all, He rules over everything that takes place in this fallen world. Enemies may wound us, but God could shut their mouths. Circumstances may hurt us, but God is in control of all things. Similarly, our brain chemistry is not beyond His ordering.

During my time of deep depression, Caroline and I were helped by a quote from the slave-trader turned hymn-writer, John Newton. Newton wrote, 'Everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds.'

God being in control may leave us with some painful and difficult questions: 'Why would God allow me to pass through this pain? Why can't I feel His presence? Why does my faith lack assurance? Will this anxiety go away?' At times we are baffled. But it is better to be in the hands of the God beyond our understanding who is

in control of all things, than living at the mercy of blind chaos – especially when that God has invited me to call Him Father.



Let's pray to the Father:

Father, You see the anguish of my soul and my affliction. Turn Your ear to me and come quickly to my rescue. Be merciful to me for I am in distress. My eyes are weak with sorrow, my body with grief. My life is consumed with anguish, and my years with groaning. Help me to trust in You. Bring me to the place where I can confidently say, 'You are my God.' Let Your face shine on me and lift my darkness. Be my hope and make my heart strong. Amen.

(Adapted from Psalm 31)

