

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him. (Job 13:15)

Like many of you, I'm sure, I recently had to undergo what is called the "open enrollment period" at my workplace, deciding on healthcare benefits options for the new year. Ordinarily, I don't think a sermon would come out of this rather mundane and ordinary administrative task, but this year I was absolutely bombarded with how bad my 'mental health' is and why I need to take advantage of a new benefit being offered so I can stay mentally stable; repeatedly being told that if I don't take advantage of all the things they provide like counseling, therapy and even drugs, I'm basically doomed to be at a minimum the most miserable of humans and at worst I'm a burden to my fellow employees and I don't care enough about them to relieve them from working with a mentally unstable individual who is likely to snap at any moment.

Now, when I say bombarded, I mean like 3 emails a week for several weeks, explanation meeting invites and a special video from our CEO about how taking care of our mental state in these "trying times is exceptionally important". Since enrollment, it's only let up a little. I have never seen the company I work for treat me like I'm essentially a mentally unaware and emotionally incapable person who needs their hand held all the time. It has been quite surreal.

As I'm busy processing all of that, along comes Fred delivering some excellent comments on Psalm 13; his comments really struck a chord with me, especially relating to the first "how long" in verse 2

"How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily..."
(Psa 13:2)

About which Fred said

"Self-help. He is looking for ways to alleviate his suffering with human effort. This is real; it's what today we would call depression. And it's daily and unrelenting."

This struck me in a rather unexpected way. Fred is of course 100% correct. David is at a lowest of low points in his spirit, putting on display his afflicted state of mind. Afflictions of the heart, mind and spirit are very real, just as real as any affliction of the body. And David is here battling within himself asking a very reasonable question – how long am I going to keep doing something that is so obviously fruitless in trying to relieve this affliction by my own power?

I think we have a tendency to regard afflictions of the spirit as perhaps lesser or not as real as those of the body because we can't "see" them – when I break my leg, the affliction is pretty obvious; when my heart or mind is causing me to groan in my spirit, it is invisible to you, and it may be hard for me to articulate what the problem actually is.

That makes it difficult I think to formulate an appropriate view of these matters, including one that is helpful to our friends when they encounter them.

Add to this that we're absolutely surrounded on all sides by those who hate a Scriptural view of anything; people who preach their own religion of "self-help" with "therapy" and of course all manner of legal or illegal drugs. All of these methods intended to silence those groanings. Silence and stifle, but not relieve.

I think it's important that we solidly maintain in our own thinking what the right spiritual view of these things is so we are less likely to lose perspective when we are under a heavy yoke. Having a right perspective on them is also critical to informing the help we provide to fellow pilgrims who do and will suffer from these groanings.

I'm going to just say up front I don't like terms like "mental health". There's lots of words the psychiatric and pharmaceutical industrial complexes use to describe various "mental health issues", like "anxiety", "depression", "eating" or "mood" "disorders". Disorders, yes. You're broken and not functioning the way you're supposed to – God made some mistake or forgot about you is what I always think when I hear people described as having "mental disorders". These words are labels invented by men. As creatures, we have an almost desperate need to put labels on everything. Names and labels are powerful. We go to great lengths to label things as it gives us a sense of power over them. This is a natural thing, I think. Consider how the LORD gave Adam dominion, and as part of that dominion brought the creatures before him to name them, thereby exercising that dominion:

"And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field..." (Gen 2:19-20)

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." (Gen 1:26)

Matters of the mind, the heart, and the spirit are mysterious to us as beings of the flesh precisely because they are not of the flesh. They can be exceptionally troubling because they are out of our control and the immediate ability to "do something" about; these issues are not as "visible" as illness, injury or the assault of an enemy, we can't just apply pressure like we can a cut to stop the bleeding. They make us feel starkly out of control (which of course we are), and finding ways to explain what is happening to us and labeling that is important to our peace, as it gives us at least some feeling of control. "Ah, this thing is what's wrong, so to fix it requires this other thing".

I don't like the labels and names these industrial complexes – and make no mistake these are industrial complexes – give these matters because they desensitize us to the truth of them. I'm not trying to make a mountain out of a mole hill, but I feel like using the language of the industrial complex to discuss, label or name a thing of the heart and spirit sucks us into the vortex of their fleshly "solutions". As a group we are, as I've said before, problem solvers. We see a thing that we think is problematic, we see pain, we see discomfort and we immediately seek to solve it. When we define the problem with the fleshly terms of the world, we are naturally going to seek answers there. Or, and I know I have fallen into this trap in my thinking many times – we minimize the problem because we don't want to indulge the flesh or possibly encourage sin.

I get that labels and common terms might make it easier to describe what you're feeling. I encourage you to consider what I'm saying here and try to look at it not from the flesh, but from the perspective of Scripture, which doesn't distinguish "mental health" from any other afflictions of the flesh, at least as far as I can see. These matters are not called out as being special or a different category that should be addressed in a unique way. That doesn't make them unreal. That doesn't make them figments of our imagination. Like everything in our lives we must look at them as spiritually as we can, rejecting what men say where it doesn't comport with the truth. I want to be explicit here – I am not saying if you describe yourself as "anxious" or "depressed" you're doing something wrong. What I'm trying to encourage us to do as a practical matter is focus our thinking from the start on where relief comes from, and that's not in therapies or techniques or gadgets or drugs.

Scripture is sufficient to provide descriptions, explanations and answers in all matters of life, and this is no exception. Note this descriptive language doesn't distinguish this with a label:

"I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears." (Psa 6:6)

One of the most important statements provided to us about these issues I think comes from Jeremiah:

"I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." (Jer 17:10)

Seeing this truth is critical to our framing these afflictions properly. This isn't a small or a light matter, this isn't a bumper sticker concept or something to treat like a rote thing to spout to each other. This is a "thus saith the Lord" passage. This isn't an interpretation or interpolation. God told us this directly. Matters of the heart and spirit – the "reins" – are matters that belong to God. David returns again and again to this core, critical truth:

"Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart." (Psa 44:21)

To apply this is the task, then. When we wake up of a morning with a miserable feeling we can't precisely define, perhaps as David describes having "watered our bed with tears", how we approach that problem is very important. It must start with a return to the fundamental concept that God has set those tears in motion, just like He set in motion the falling of every snowflake that you see out your window on a morning.

In that moment the place to start is a full acknowledgement that God sent the state of your mind and heart, all its causes and everything surrounding it. I recently came across a passage from Pink, commenting on Hebrews 2:10 that I really liked as a description of this principal.

For context, the verse says

"For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Heb 2:10)

Pink expounds it this way:

*"And what are the practical bearings upon us of this title of God? First, an acknowledgment of God in this character is due from us and required by Him. To believe and affirm that "for Him are all things, and by Him are all things" is simply owning that He is God—high above all, supreme over all, directing all. Anything short of this is, really, atheism. Second, contentment is the sure result to a heart which really lays hold of and rests upon this truth. If **I really believe that "all things" are for God's glory and by His invincible and perfect will, then I shall receive submissively, yea, thankfully, whatsoever He ordains and sends me.** The language of such an one must be, "It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good" (1 Sam. 3:18). Third, confidence and praise will be the outcome. God only does that which "becomes" Him; **therefore, whatsoever He does must be right and best.** Those who truly recognize this "know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28). **True it is that our short-sighted and sin-darkened vision is often unable to see why God does certain things, yet we may be fully assured that He always has a wise and holy reason.**"*

We all get into this state at some point. Some of us experience it frequently, some of us less so – our lots are all unique. None of us should expect to avoid being afflicted in this manner, given that Christ our Head experienced these sorts of afflictions while He walked on the earth.

For example, He suffered in His heart over Lazarus

*“Jesus therefore again **groaning** in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.” (Joh 11:38)*

This groaning is the same idea that David expresses repeatedly throughout the Psalms. Another example comes from the garden toward the end of His first advent:

*“Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And **being in an agony** he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luk 22:42-44)*

This “being in an agony” is Strong’s 74 *agōnia*, which Thayer’s tells us means

- 1) a struggle for victory
 - 1a) gymnastic exercise, wrestling
- 2) of severe mental struggles and emotions, agony, anguish

Our King and Master jostled and struggled with His heart in His hour of trial, which isn’t said to demean His majesty or deity, or to imply some weakness in God. He took on our form and experienced all the struggles we can ever experience, without that darkening of His vision and perspective Pink speaks of, and did so **without succumbing to them**.

We, however, **all** suffer from that “sin-darkened vision” which prevents us from seeing the simple and blessed reality of God’s ordaining hand. We need something to bring us out of that sin-darkened view of things. Scripture, as always points us at the answer:

“And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.” (Ezr 9:8)

This is a very odd phrase “*to give us a nail in his holy place*”, but perhaps the greater oddity is what that nail is there to do, “*that our God may lighten our eyes*”. Nails aren’t particularly known for lighting things up, so that takes some inspection.

The word translated “nail” is *yaw-thade’* which appears 24 times in Scripture. It means a few things like the nail you use as a tent stake, as in Jael nailing Sisera to the ground with a nail (Jud 4:21), it can mean the pin like Delilah used to weave Samson’s hair into the woof of her loom (Jud 16:14). In this case it means something slightly different; here it’s not just a fastener, it’s a peg for hanging things from, especially heavy things.

And that's the key. We are given a nail, a peg upon which to hang all of our heaviest burdens, including the groanings of our spirit, the mental and emotional struggles we engage in every day and all the darkness associated with those struggles. By putting those burdens on that nail, not seeking aid from the inventions of men, God will "lighten our eyes" to "revive us in our bondage". This isn't some coat peg in the public space, some "sloppy agape" kind of thing – the nail is where? "His holy place". Only those who go to worship Him in that place will have access to it.

That lighten means pretty much what it seems – bring light into our eyes. God will remove the blindness we have toward His grace in our moment of mental turmoil. The word itself means luminous. Our eyes will be made luminous through Him if we take the burdens of our hearts and hang them on the nail that is placed there **for that purpose**. When we struggle to avail ourselves of this nail, I believe it is largely because we fail to recognize this simple truth

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psa 46:1)

Focus on the "very present" aspect. It's a bit of a strange phrase, since in most contexts a person is either present or they are not. There aren't really degrees of being present in the base definition of the word. But the word translated 'very' means 'vehemently' or 'speedily'. So -- vehemently present, adamantly and immediately there.

The idea I think is displayed well with this account:

*"And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. **And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased."***
(Mat 14:22-32)

If this help is imminently and immediately available, how do we get into a spot where our mental and emotional machinations drive us further and further away from that

help? We know, intellectually that it is there, we've looked at these verses many times from the pulpit and individually together. How do people of faith end up in a spiral of despair or anguish such that they make their bed swim in their own tears?

Well, that kind of becomes the question of the hour, doesn't it? Many things can keep us from it – our pride, an immaturity in or a simple lack of faith, impatience, anger, discontentment, etc. We have examples throughout Scripture where God's people lose perspective and miss the fact that the help is there. There are a plethora of verses from David's Psalms asking essentially "why have you forgotten me, God?" Jonah was steeped in his rebellion and didn't see how God's hand was guiding his way to accomplish His goals; Elijah was wrapped up in his anger and indignation such that he couldn't see the forest for the trees as it were; Paul had what I call his expectation of strength that needed adjustment:

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (2Co 12:7-10)

I think one of the most prevalent reasons we don't see this help is that the flesh's first instinct is to go to the flesh. When we seek to use devices of men and solutions derived from fleshly means, the true help is not evident. When we do not call to our Master for that help and instead substitute it for the imaginations of our own heart, how could we possibly see it? When we don't acknowledge and submit to the providence of God in our affliction and instead demand resolution, relief or release from it, the help is unlikely to come. The help will come in its ordained time when we've sought it out. Seeking help requires us to deny ourselves, deny our strength, deny the creative problem solving we specialize in and rely on our Master instead.

Peter could have called for John to throw him a line – a fleshly response to danger; some may even say it would have been a practical response. Instead, Peter cries to his Master "Lord, save me!" And immediately. Instantaneously. Christ reaches out and saves him. Some may even say it was an utterly *impractical* response. How was Christ going to actually save Peter who was drowning if He was standing on the water? Wouldn't the smart reaction have been to cry out for and use those tools the Lord had provided, right there on the deck of the boat for that very purpose? Why else would there be lines and life-saving devices there if we weren't to make use of them? Those are answers that derive from the flesh.

You might say it was an obvious choice to cry out to Christ for help, he was standing right there – on the water, but still standing there. He was closer, and in his immediate presence. And in the teeth of that comment is the key – is Christ any *less* immediately with us? There's the necessary acknowledgement of our faith.

*“God is our refuge and strength, a **very present** help in trouble.” (Psa 46:1)*

Our Help is **very present**. We have but to cry out in faith “Lord, save me” and wait for the help to come.

We have a duty to see and help each other to make that plea. We cannot pass a test of faith for others, but that's not the same as recognizing the need for encouragement to faith, especially in difficult times. John crying out for Christ to save Peter in his trial of faith would have been not ineffectual, but not the same. We can and must help to counsel and comfort, reminding and exhorting each other to hang our weighty burdens on the nail. That can be difficult when we don't know precisely what the other person is experiencing, and many times it seems when a person is struggling in these places, they can't articulate how or why they are struggling. As problem solvers, that is frustrating because our cry is “if you can't tell me what's wrong, how do I fix it”!

Let's be explicit here – **you don't**. It's not your job to fix it. In an hour of trial, what a person needs isn't for you in your wisdom to fix anything. In an hour of trial, they need help remembering that their help is very present and they need to call out. They may need help calling out via fervent prayers for one another. That doesn't make them weak or faithless or anything other than pilgrims struggling in their way. Judging a person harshly because they cannot precisely articulate or overcome their own spirit in a way that is acceptable to you is reminiscent of Job's friends, and that isn't a place we want to be:

“I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all. Shall vain words have an end? or what emboldeneth thee that thou answerest? I also could speak as ye do: if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you, and shake mine head at you. But I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the moving of my lips should assuage your grief.” (Job 16:2-5)

We don't want to be miserable comforters. That takes awareness and work so that we strengthen one another with our mouths to assuage each other's grief. Let us pray together as David

“Make thy face to shine upon thy servant: save me for thy mercies' sake. Let me not be ashamed, O LORD; for I have called upon thee: let the wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave.” (Psa 31:16-17)