

State of Mind
Monsters
March 3, 2019

Worship Song – Reckless Love / Prayer / New Wine /

Feature Song – Need You Now / Offering

Heavenly Father, right now there are more than a few of us who are crying out “God, please take ‘this’ from me.

- Please take this situation away
- Please take this burden away
- Please take this pain away

... because it’s beyond me. It’s more than I can handle.”

And we know that sometimes You do that. Sometimes You intervene and

change our circumstances. But more often than not, You give us strength so that we can *overcome* our circumstances.

And I pray that what we do in the rest of our time together would help accomplish that purpose.

I ask in the name of our savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

Amen.

As Shannon said we're in the middle of a series called *State of Mind* and our purpose in this series has been, primarily, to learn ...

- How to take control of our mental and emotional health.
- How to be *proactive* instead of *reactive* when it comes to what's going on inside of us.

And from the feedback I've gotten over the past month or so, it seems like this has been helpful to many people. And I'm very happy about that.

But when I was thinking about the kinds of things that might be worth talking about in this series, I realized that, for some of us, the very idea of ...

- “Thinking about your thinking” (like we talked about in the first week)

- And adopting the right mindset about trouble when it comes (like we talked about in the second week)
- And constructively dealing with our emotions when really bad stuff comes (like we talked about last week) ...

For some of us, all of that seems almost impossible to imagine because our mental and emotional issues aren't ...

- An occasional struggle with anxious thoughts or feelings.
- Or a day or two here and there where we feel a little down.
- Or the seasonal depression

everyone is feeling from this winter-that-never ends.

For some of us, our mental and emotional issues are much more *chronic*. Instead of visiting us occasionally, it's almost like they've become a part of us, like a proverbial "thorn in the flesh" ...

... which is actually more *biblical* than proverbial because that phrase comes from something the Apostle Paul once wrote.

Paul, for those of you who may not know, was a first-century Jewish rabbi who persecuted other Jews who had come to believe that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was *not only* the long-awaited Messiah of Israel but also God

in the flesh.

That was blasphemy according to the Hebrew theology of the day, which is why Paul was trying to put an end to Christianity ... and which also – as kind of a side note – raises the question of what it would take to cause the formerly orthodox Jews he was persecuting to believe that Jesus was actually God incarnate. It would have to be something so incredible that there was no denying that it was true.

And about the only thing that would meet that criteria is a resurrection from the dead ... which is exactly what those Jews Paul persecuted were claiming had happened to Jesus.

But that's a topic for another day ...

well, except to say that this risen Jesus appeared to Paul on one of his deadly campaigns and Paul *himself* became a believer.

And not just any believer.

Paul almost singlehandedly took the Gospel of Jesus all over the Roman Empire. He was by far the greatest evangelist and missionary for Jesus who ever lived. He is the reason Christianity didn't die out as some obscure heretical sect of Judaism. It's no exaggeration to say that he is the reason we are here today.

If there was ever a person who could make a case that they deserve a smooth ride on a smooth road, it would have to be Paul.

If there was ever a person who could justifiably expect God to intervene and make things easier in life, it would have to be Paul.

And yet, the story of Paul's life tells us that did not happen.

In addition to the constant persecution and recurring imprisonments he suffered for spreading the news about Jesus, which was a violation of the Pax Romana (or "the Peace of Rome") ...

Paul writes:

I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

2

Corinthians 12:7 (NLT)

Now, it's not clear what Paul means by "thorn in the flesh" since he never tells us in any of his writings and neither do any of the other New Testament writers.

But obviously, whatever it was, it wasn't an occasional burden. It wasn't something that came and went with the weather. It was constant.

- It was a part of him, literally, *in the flesh*, in his physical being.
- Furthermore, it wasn't something that could easily be managed. Paul says it was *torment*.
- And it was something that caused

him *shame*.

Hmmm ... a physiological condition ... which causes torment ... and brings shame ...

To those who suffer from it (or who know someone who suffers), that could also describe *clinical anxiety and depression*, a medical condition in which our brain gets “stuck” in those states, leaving us to feel nervous and afraid or sad and depressed when there is no logical reason to feel that way.

I’m not saying that Paul suffered from either of those illnesses but, if he did, he would not have been unique among those who have led God’s people. It’s likely that King Saul and King David of Israel both struggled with anxiety and

depression as did the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah and Elijah.

By the way, one of the things that's so great about the Bible is that it doesn't try to hide the weaknesses of its greatest spiritual leaders. Just do a search sometime on each of those guys and the word "depression" and you can see for yourself.

Whatever it was, Paul's thorn in the flesh provides a really good framework from which to address the challenges of anxiety and depression.

A Thorny Framework

So let's talk about those three aspects of anxiety and depression for just a bit.

First of all, anxiety and depression are physiological conditions in the brain.

We've talked a lot about neuroplasticity in this series – how our thoughts shape our brains and then the shape of our brains end up directing the flow of our thoughts which then shapes our brains which then directs the flow of thinking ... and so on.

Point being ... the thinking and feeling that goes along with clinical anxiety and depression is a physical condition in the brain.

Check out this video which explains, at a very high level, the biology of depression.

Video Clip – 1 THE SCIENCE OF DEPRESSION
(2.9 min)

Got all that?

Point is anxiety and depression are physiological conditions. They are *figurative thorns* in the *literal flesh* of the brain.

Second, anxiety and depression are torment.

That's not a word we use very much but it's so descriptive because "to torment" someone is to taunt them repeatedly; to be constantly in their face for the purpose of inflicting mental and physical suffering.

And if you talk to people who have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression, that's how they describe it.

Some of you may have heard of Tiffany

Jenkins. She's gained quite a following on her Youtube channel "Juggling the Jenkins" because she's quite funny but also because she's transparent about what it's like to suffer from an anxiety disorder.

A while back she posted this video which illustrates quite literally what the torment of anxiety is like.

Check it out.

Video Clip – 2 ME VS. ANXIETY (2.2 min)

Now, that video is kind of funny but the experience is not.

"You can tell us everything is OK, and sometimes we know it's true," writes one sufferer. "But the monster of anxiety will still assure us, louder than

anything else, that everything is wrong, nothing is right, every bad thing that could possibly happen is certainly going to happen and there's simply no other alternative.”

“We are convinced we've ruined everything we've ever touched, worked on, or looked at. It's so real and in our state of panic, it feels more real than anything else ... We live a life in which our feelings actively try to kill us.”ⁱ

That's incredible. That's *torment*.

Finally, anxiety and depression produce shame.

In 1993, shortly after I decided to quit my job at Park Hill Baptist Church and launch North Heartland, my wife Jetta had what used to be called a “nervous

breakdown.”

At the time we had no idea what was going on. All we knew was that, for days on end, she could not sleep or eat and was in a constant state of panic for no logical reason at all. It was like someone flipped on her adrenaline switch and then forgot to turn it off. She was like a scared little puppy all the time.

It got so bad that we even wondered if there was some kind of demonic oppression, so we fasted and prayed. But nothing changed.

Finally, she went to see a psychiatrist who, ironically enough, had his office right here in this building – down the hall towards the entrances – back when this facility was a mental health

institution (Prairie Hills Hospital) ... she went to see a psychiatrist who told her that she had an anxiety disorder ... which she still deals with today.

One of the things we soon discovered is that being diagnosed with a mental illness isn't like being diagnosed with cancer. When you have cancer everyone knows you really *can't* do anything about it yourself. You can't *will* your cancer to leave.

But with anxiety ... well, “why can't you just tell yourself the truth? Why can't you get control of your thoughts and emotions?”

- You must be really weak. (shame)
- You must be crazy if you need a pill

to be able to think straight?
(shame)

- You must not trust God very much
(double shame, especially if you're
a Christian)
- You must not be praying enough or
reading your Bible enough. (shame)
- You must have some hidden sin in
your life for which God is punishing
you. (shame)

And those are not thoughts that you
have just once and then they go away.

No, when you're diagnosed with a
mental illness, because of
neuroplasticity, that illness latches onto
those thoughts of shame and

condemnation and drives them even further into your mind ... which adds to your anxiety and/or depression.

It's a vicious cycle, a horrible existence when you're in the middle of it because, like Paul, you have a thorn in your flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment you. You aren't proud of it. You're humiliated.

Grace & Power

So what did Paul do about his thorn? And what might we learn from his example that could apply to those who suffer with these things?

Let's pick up the story. After Paul talks about the "thorn" in his flesh (whatever it is) ...

He writes ...

*Three different times I
begged the Lord to take it
away.*

2 Corinthians 12:8
(NLT)

I can almost imagine Paul's prayer:
"Lord Jesus, I'm trying to do your work.
I'm trying to be the new man you've
called me to be. But is so hard with this
issue constantly dragging me down. So,
God, please take this. It's beyond me.
It's too much to handle. It's more than I
can bear."

You can almost sense the desperation he
must've felt!

And if you suffer from clinical anxiety or

depression, you know what that feels like.

In fact, you may have even begged the Lord to take it away like Paul did.

But he has not done that for you ... just like he didn't do it for Paul.

Instead, Paul tells us ... and if you're a Christian – if you believe that Jesus died on the cross to be your savior and rose again on the third day ... if you're a Christian what Paul is about to say is very important for you to understand.

And if you're not a Christian, what Paul is about to say doesn't apply to you directly but I hope you'll listen anyway because it will give you a key insight as to the nature of the Christian faith.

Instead of God supernaturally and miraculously taking away Paul's thorn like he begged ...

Paul tells us that ...

*Each time [the Lord] said,
“My grace is all you need.
My power works best in
weakness.” 2 Corinthians
12:9 (NLT)*

Now, if you've been around church or Christianity for very long, whenever you hear the word “grace” your first reaction is probably “oh, yeah, I know about that.

- “Grace means that God has treated me better than I deserve.”
- “Grace means that He has shown

me favor that I didn't and cannot earn."

And we then apply that idea to our salvation. "Grace means that I don't have to try to make up for all of my sins because Jesus died on the cross instead of me."

But that's not what God is talking about to Paul here. He's not talking about *saving* grace. He's talking about *sustaining* grace.

So God's repeated answer to Paul's repeated prayer means this: "Paul, I'm not going to remove your thorn like you want me to, but I *am* going to show you great favor. I am going to treat you better than you deserve, better than it might look at first glance."

“Because, Paul, you’re going to learn something about Me and about you. You’re going to learn that not only am I powerful enough to save you from your sins. I’m powerful enough to get you through this.

“Beyond that, I’m powerful enough to enable you to do what I’ve asked you to do in spite of this thorn. And when you actually do it – when you overcome this thing that truly is a torment – you will bring me even more glory through your life. And even more people will be drawn to me because of you.”

Now, Paul doesn’t tell us his immediate reaction to that answer. Based on the fact that this conversation between him and God took place more than once, I

think it's reasonable to assume that his first response was not overly enthusiastic.

“Lord, maybe you didn't understand me. This is too much for me.”

“Yes, Paul, I know. But I am enough.”

“Lord, I'm not sure about this.”

“I know Paul, but I am. Trust me.”

And at some point (we don't know how long this went on) Paul did trust God.

And *when* he did it wasn't a resigned, “Ok, I guess this is just how it's going to be. I guess I'll just have to muddle through.”

Instead, Paul got to the place in his life
...

Where he was able to say ...

I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NLT)

Paul experienced that the Lord was right.

Paul experienced the power of the Holy Spirit working through him, giving him

strength and endurance far beyond his own abilities.

Unexpected Blessings

Now, I know some of you are thinking, “well, that’s just peachy for Paul. But what about me? Or what about this person I love and care about who is suffering from anxiety or depression? What does God’s sustaining grace look like for me or for them? In what ways could they see and experience His power and strength?”

I can’t answer that question for you from my own experience so I asked someone who can – my wife, who has for almost 25 years lived with her particular thorn in the flesh. (And I’m not talking about living with me. She’s

had to deal with that one for almost 40 years!)

I'm going to summarize from our conversation some of the ways she has seen God's power in her life – how God has actually transformed her because of and through her anxiety.

And just so you'll know, these are things I've seen in her, too, because *before she had anxiety she did not have in great measure the characteristics* I'm about to share with you.

First of all, living with anxiety has produced in her ...

- 1. An ability to empathize with the weaknesses of others (which is kind of what Jesus did).**

The first thing she said in our discussion was, “Everybody has something to deal with in their life. I just happened to draw the anxiety card.”

In other words, “I’m no different or better than anyone else. We’re all in this together. And my anxiety disorder is a reminder of that.”

An ability to empathize with the weaknesses of others.

2. Living with anxiety has also meant having to accept physical and emotional limitations.

She said, “I’ve realized that I just can’t be as busy as others. Sometimes I have to say no to things” which means that some things aren’t going to get done and some people are going to be disappointed.

It wasn't that way early in her life. In fact, part of the reason she developed the disorder was because she *never* said no. She always had to be the perfect <whatever>.

SO this is a good thing for her because truth is, it's not all up to us.

3. Anxiety led to the discovery that the physical is just as important as the spiritual.

Most Christians tend to think that the answer to every problem is something spiritual. “Just pray about it. Read your Bible more. Sing more worship music in the car, etc.”

There's nothing wrong with any of that – you *should* do those things if you're a Christian because they do help – but the

truth is that taking care of the physical dimension of life matters, too.

You wouldn't tell someone with cancer, diabetes or heart problem to just pray about it or give it to God. You'd say, "You need to see a doctor."

Soon after Jetta's anxiety disorder was identified, we attended a "living with anxiety and depression" workshop in the café.

The only thing I remember was the guy leading it saying "part of the reason you're here is because of stress and the way you think. And you need to change both of those.

"And the meds you've been given will calm your system down enough so that

you can actually do that. Relief depends on both of those – dealing with your physical brain and your life.”

4. Anxiety has created a healthy reliance on others.

When it’s really bad, an anxiety attack requires having people around who will validate what you’re feeling – “yes, this feels real to you and it’s OK that you feel scared” ...

... but who will also speak truth that “what you’re feeling isn’t real. You will not die from it. This, too, shall pass.”

I don’t know how many times I’ve said those exact words over the years.

So anxiety has created a healthy reliance on others.

5. Finally, anxiety has created a yearning for the day when Jesus returns and everything is made new.

When there is no more sickness or death. No more crying or mourning or pain. No more anxiety or depression or doctors or meds.

At the end and sort of as the bottom line, Jetta said, “it’s a huge comfort knowing that God is in control and that I can get through it; that He knows what’s going on with me; that none of this is a surprise to Him. He’s got my back.”

And then she said almost exactly what Paul wrote. “It’s not that God will cure me of this but that he is my ultimate

strength.”

Next Steps

If you suffer from a mental illness, I want to invite you today to do three things that may help you to come to that same conclusion.

1. Stop thinking of yourself as a victim.

It's ok to admit you're not strong; that you're so far in over your head in discouragement that you can't even see the hope of Christ. But you have to stop ruminating on all the ways your thorn is ruining your life.

By the way, you might have to take your meds to do that. You might have to create some mental and emotional

breathing room and that's what those drugs are for.

And this is really hard for a lot of people. One depression-sufferer writes:

What I remember is looking at those pills and seeing them as a mark of failure which I could never overcome, from which I would never recover. If I started taking those pills I would be damaged goods. My whole future ... seemed wrapped up in this tiny pill. It seemed as though this pill would change my identity.

However, it hit him one day that "Give us this day our daily bread" means more than the food on the table. It means everything we need to support this body

and lifeⁱⁱ ... including those pills.

So, stop thinking of yourself as a victim.
And take your meds.

2. Start looking for ways that God can bring something new and beautiful out of you.

I'm talking about things that were not possible before you developed whatever condition is your thorn in the flesh. Maybe you start with Jetta's list and change it or add to it.

3. Tell yourself often "My weakness enables the power of Christ to work in me."

Let's say that together, shall we?

A pastor who suffered from depression once pointed out that "most of our unhappiness in life is due to the fact that

we are listening to ourselves instead of talking to ourselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You need to start talking to yourself, preaching to yourself even: “my weakness enables the power of Christ to work in me.”

The Darkest Road

Now, we could probably call it quits at this point because I think that at least some of this is helpful if you’re one of those who has these particular thorns in *your* flesh.

But before we do, I think we need to spend a few minutes looking a little further down this dark road because, sometimes, when left unaddressed and untreated, anxiety and depression can

become untamed beasts capable of *literally* destroying life.

I'm talking about suicide.

And if the statistics are correct, right now at least a few people in this room or watching online are thinking about it. The suffering and the pain is so bad that taking your own life seems like the only way out.

I want to tell you that it's not but I probably don't have a lot of credibility because I've never been where you are.

But there are some who have. There are some folks who have attempted suicide and survived and they want to tell you.

So, here's a little video they made.

Video Clip – 2 SUICIDE – PEOPLE WHO’VE BEEN THERE (1.8 min)

As I was preparing for this message, I came across another video – this one from pastor Rick Warren – and I’m going to show a bit of it in just a minute.

But in this video he told the story of a guy who jumped from a bridge and survived. The guy said that as he was falling through the air he experienced a moment of incredible clarity.

He said, “I suddenly realized every problem in my life is solvable except the one I just created.”

And if you’re thinking of taking your own life, that is true for you. Call the

number we just on the screen. Ask me or one of the other pastors for help.

Now, if you're *not* one of those folks who is thinking about suicide and the statistics are correct, it's likely that *someone you know* is. They may have even said something to you.

So, I want you to hear Rick Warren's advice on what you should do. And I think you'll quickly understand why his advice is worth following.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 3 RICK WARREN – SOMEONE YOU KNOW (4.3 min)

By the way, when Rick said that “the unforgivable sin isn’t suicide,” he’s right.

The unforgivable sin is when we choose not to believe in and receive Jesus and what He did to make forgiveness for sin possible – that “saving grace” we talked about earlier.

Ok, let’s pray.

- For those thinking of suicide: that they would desire abundant life more than comfortable death.
- For those who know someone: that they would be brave and You would use them to save a life.

- For all of us ... that we would be filled with the hope that gives us strength in weakness and the hope for the world to come.

Thank you that we can have both of those things because of Jesus and what He did for us.

In His Name we pray, amen.

Feature – Hope in Front of Me

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week is the final week of this series – *Voices* ... because so much of what goes on in our head is directly impacted by voices *outside* of it (like social media). So we're going to talk about how handle them in a way that maintains our

mental and emotional health.

2. After that ... a six-week series ...
THIS IS US: *why we are the way we are as human beings*. How can my life be so good *and* so bad? How can *I* be so good and so bad?”

More on that next week but, again, another great opportunity to invite folks who aren't going to church anywhere.

3. Blessing

May the God of hope
Fill you with all joy and peace
As you trust in him,

So that you may overflow with hope
By the power of the Holy Spirit.^{iv}

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.challies.com/articles/some-things-you-should-know-about-christians-who-struggle-with-anxiety/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.darkmyroad.org/2006/06/topics/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Lloyd Jones, this quote is originally in the form of a question.

^{iv} Romans 15:13 (NIV)