



Mental
Illness

MENTAL ILLNESS: REDUCING SUFFERING IN THE CHURCH

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(1 Samuel 16:14-23)

No one escapes periods of trouble in life. Everyone struggles with problems in life, such as periods of being down, struggles with grief, or handling relationship difficulties. But what compels people to “go crazy,” commit suicide, cut themselves deliberately, or hurt others mindlessly? What causes some to hear voices or have hallucinations without drugs? These unique maladies and extreme behaviors indicate deeper problems.

THE REALITY OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Human suffering is ultimately tied to sin. Sometimes it is directly influenced by demonic activity (1 Sam. 26:14-23). Mental disorders also involve suffering that is sometimes related to or rooted in biological, genetic, and physiological problems. When mental illness interacts with sin problems, relationship problems, or other kinds of illness, a person, marriage, or family can become overwhelmed.

Studies of clinical disorders in the twentieth century have revealed patterns that manifest a more serious level of disorder. We have also developed more effective interventions that promise hope and healing.

The failure to understand and treat the multiple reasons that people suffer—including understanding the distinctions between sin, mental illness, and demonic influence—has significant consequences. Some people are just confessing sins when they should also be taking medicine. Others are blaming nonexistent illnesses when they should be confessing their sins. Demons are being cast out of schizophrenics who need medical treatment. People who need exorcism and relief from demons are put into mental hospitals and drugged into complacency.

THE TREATMENT OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Misdiagnosis and improper treatment still remains all too common at the intersection of mental health and Christian ministry. Sometimes well-meaning Christians discourage those suffering mental illness from getting professional counseling or medical help. Far too many people in the church suffer needlessly because someone in a position of influence falsely believes that a “spiritual” solution alone is the answer to every problem. Instead, Christians must understand that physicians, balm, salve, and other medicines were used throughout the Scriptures. Just as a diabetic needs insulin to live, those with mental illness sometimes need medicine to correct their disordered brain chemistry.

In many cases, there is no one single cause for a problem, but the weight of multiple issues has added up to a personal or family crisis. Some cases *do* require medicine, counseling, and spiritual warfare because sin, illness, and demon oppression are all at issue. A comprehensive approach to Christian counseling treatment should use a collaborative team of specialists—doctors, psychologists, counselors, social workers, health educators, nutritionists, physical therapists, and others—to under-

stand and treat the many dimensions of the problem.

As a Christian psychiatrist who runs a nationwide network of clinics and as a medical doctor, I (Paul Meier) deal with these issues and questions on a daily basis. My interest and specialty is in the biogenetic and physical bases of mental disorders. I treat patients who were born with high and low levels of crucial chemicals in the brain—what we call neurotransmitters—that are essential to the proper functioning of brain and body.

Low levels of serotonin, for example, cause a variety of depressive disorders or lifelong obsessive-compulsive traits. Patients with dopamine or GABA abnormalities often have high-energy manic episodes that involve paranoid delusions, feelings of grandeur and power, even hallucinations. Manic episodes are almost always controlled with GABA correcting medicines. The voices that often get attributed to demons nearly always disappear with the proper treatment of dopamine medicines. Auditory hallucinations, in other words, are rarely demonic, but are more a function of an inherited disorder that affects the auditory regions of the brain.

WORKING TOGETHER TO HELP THOSE WHO SUFFER

Mental disorders are a significant issue in society and in the church. We believe that the church and the mental health professions—which for too long have been at odds with one another—must work together. We believe that the church, in fact, is anointed by God to be specially designed for the care and comfort of the mentally ill—a “spiritual hospital” for those who suffer this way.

We all face times when the wise counsel of our pastor, friend, colleague, or doctor is essential for our safety and well-being. A small but significant percentage

of the populace—including the body of Christ—will suffer from the kinds of mental disorders that require the special knowledge and treatment of a psychiatrist and other specialized caregivers.

A Christian psychiatrist should understand and respect the spiritual as well as the emotional, relational, and physical realms of life, and should incorporate God’s truth about the totality of persons into their work. Christian counselors can help others deal with the thinking, feeling, and behavioral effects of mental disorders, and should be a welcome part of the entire treatment team. Any kind of helping professional should be in close consultation with the patient’s pastor. Our common goal is to help all sufferers free their souls and be able to grow up and mature in Christ.

The pastor is the one who maintains an ongoing relationship with the suffering church member, so he or she has a special role as the shepherd, acting as the “case manager.” The pastor is usually best suited to assist the church member in using treatment and making the transition back into life in the church and the community.

The church is critical in the care and solace of those suffering with mental disorders. These people are very often isolated, fearful, confused, and in need of the unconditional love of Christians to repair and return to vital living.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of mental illness include:

- > Psalm 34:18
- > Proverbs 13:12
- > Isaiah 40:27-31
- > James 1:12-27

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on mental illness at Daniel 4:33 on page 1110. See also the personality profile of Nebuchadnezzar on page 1111.

issued a decree to bring in all the wise *men* of Babylon before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷Then the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers came in, and I told them the dream; but they did not make known to me its interpretation. ⁸But at last Daniel came before me (his name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god; in him is the Spirit of the Holy God), and I told the dream before him, *saying*: ⁹"Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the Spirit of the Holy God is in you, and no secret troubles you, explain to me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.

¹⁰ "These *were* the visions of my head *while* on my bed:

I was looking, and behold,
A tree in the midst of the earth,
And its height was great.

¹¹ The tree grew and became strong;
Its height reached to the heavens,
And it could be seen to the ends of all
the earth.

¹² Its leaves *were* lovely,
Its fruit abundant,

And in it *was* food for all.
The beasts of the field found shade
under it,
The birds of the heavens dwelt in its
branches,
And all flesh was fed from it.

¹³ "I saw in the visions of my head *while*
on my bed, and there was a watcher, a
holy one, coming down from heaven.
¹⁴He cried aloud and said thus:

'Chop down the tree and cut off its
branches,
Strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit.
Let the beasts get out from under it,
And the birds from its branches.

¹⁵ Nevertheless leave the stump and roots
in the earth,
Bound with a band of iron and bronze,
In the tender grass of the field.
Let it be wet with the dew of heaven,
And let him graze with the beasts
On the grass of the earth.

¹⁶ Let his heart be changed from *that of a*
man,
Let him be given the heart of a beast,
And let seven times^a pass over him.

4:16 ^aPossibly seven years, and so in verses 23, 25,
and 32



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KEY PASSAGE

WHOLENESS

(4:33)

Perhaps one of the most difficult situations for Christians to face is the problem of mental illness. For Christians to face such difficulty somehow seems sinful. It is important to remember, however, that people are whole beings. First, we are spiritual beings, created by God and incomplete without Him. Also, we are physical beings, and a physical disease can lead to psychological or spiritual problems, and vice versa. And then too, we are psychological beings, meaning that each person has a mind, emotions, and a will. The interrelationships among these three realms in our humanity mean that specific problems may have many symptoms and causes behind them. If believers face some form of an emotional problem, they should seek counsel from wise, qualified Christians who can treat them with a comprehensive approach. During such a time, other believers must surround the hurting brother or sister in prayer. God promises to help His people through even the most difficult times.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about mental illness on pages 364, 365. See also the personality profile of Nebuchadnezzar on page 1111.

17 'This decision is by the decree of the watchers,
And the sentence by the word of the holy ones,
In order that the living may know
That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men,
Gives it to whomever He will,
And sets over it the lowest of men.'

18 "This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belteshazzar, declare its interpretation, since all the wise *men* of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation; but you *are* able, for the Spirit of the Holy God is in you."

DANIEL EXPLAINS THE SECOND DREAM

19 Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astonished for a time, and his thoughts troubled him. So the king spoke, and said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation trouble you."

Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, *may* the dream concern those who hate you, and its interpretation concern your enemies!

20 "The tree that you saw, which grew and became strong, whose height reached to the heavens and which *could be seen* by all the earth, ²¹whose leaves *were* lovely and its fruit abundant, in which *was*

PERSONALITY PROFILE



Mental Illness

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S ILLNESS

(DANIEL 4:33)

Mental and emotional instability ran rampant in Nebuchadnezzar's family. Such is the legacy and heritage of those who set themselves up as gods. Daniel tells the shocking story of the king's emotional breakdown after years of success ruling the Babylonian Empire. In spite of his great victories as a warrior and achievements as a builder, Nebuchadnezzar suffered from a form of insanity similar to what we now call lycanthropy: He believed he was a wild animal. In the king's case, the condition arose as a direct result of his pride and arrogance. Nebuchadnezzar was warned of pride's danger by Daniel, but this king chose to ignore his own insignificance before God. No sooner did the words of pride cross his lips than God removed the kingdom from his power. "He was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws" (Dan. 4:33).

Daniel tells us that this condition lasted for seven years, until the king's reason returned to him when he acknowledged God (Dan. 4:25, 35, 36). Presumably, Daniel and others continued to run the affairs of state while Nebuchadnezzar was in this condition. He resumed his reign as a deeply humbled man.

Nebuchadnezzar was eventually succeeded by Nabonidus, who later abdicated the throne and lived in self-imposed exile in Arabia. During this time, Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, ruled Babylon as a co-regent with his father, Nabonidus. While Belshazzar was in power, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medes and the Persians.

Modern times have witnessed similar instances where national leaders suffered from times of depression or mental breakdown but were able to continue to exercise their responsibilities. The causes are not always the same as Nebuchadnezzar's, but cases of mental disorders require compassionate treatment. For the king, time and humility provided a pathway of recovery. Those who cared for him, like Daniel, had to practice patience. The healing of mental illness is rarely an instant cure.

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preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve *were* with Him, ²and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, ³and Joanna the wife of **Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna**, and many others who provided for Him^a from their substance.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

⁴And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: ⁵"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. ⁸But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

⁹Then His disciples asked Him, saying, "What does this parable mean?"

¹⁰And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest *it is given* in parables, that

*"Seeing they may not see,
And hearing they may not understand."*^a

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER EXPLAINED

¹¹"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹²Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest

they should believe and be saved. ¹³But the ones on the rock *are those* who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. ¹⁴Now the ones *that* fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. ¹⁵But the ones *that* fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.

THE PARABLE OF THE REVEALED LIGHT

¹⁶"No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light. ¹⁷For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor *anything* hidden that will not be known and come to light. ¹⁸Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him *more* will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."

JESUS' MOTHER AND BROTHERS COME TO HIM

¹⁹Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. ²⁰And it was told Him *by some*, who said, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You."

²¹But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."

WIND AND WAVE OBEY JESUS

²²Now it happened, on a certain day, that He got into a boat with His disciples. And He

8:3 ^aNU-Text and M-Text read *them*. **8:10** ^aIsaiah 6:9

SOUL NOTE



Mind Power (8:26, 27) Jesus stepped from the boat and was met by a demon-possessed man. What might have appeared to be a mental illness was in this case caused by demon possession. Usually, however, mental illness has other causes, such as genetics or hormonal imbalances. We may not know anyone as wild as this man, but we may know someone dealing with the debilitation of mental illness. Such people need assurance of their worthiness before God, as well as Christian professional help. Jesus has the power to heal, but He may not always choose to do so. God's people must trust His wisdom through any difficult time. **Topic: Mental Illness**