

The Christian and Mental Health:

Part 2: Establishing a framework

This second introductory study focusses on how we are to consider mental wellbeing in light of the overarching storyline of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible proclaims one story and whenever asking the question “what does the Bible teach about X?” it is always best to do this with reference to that story. It is helpful to do this under the four headings of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Re-Creation.

A) Creation

The doctrine of creation teaches us that God has intentionally and purposefully made all things, including humans. There is therefore a reason for our existence and a way we are meant to live, both of which come from God, not us. And since humans alone are created in the image of God, our fundamental identity includes being reflections of God.

In the opening chapters of the Bible God is creating through work, relationships and routine. As part of this creation He makes humans in His image and calls them to work (**Genesis 2:15**), live in community (**Genesis 2:18**) and follow His routines (compare **Genesis 2:1-3** with **Exodus 20:8-11**). These basic building blocks of human life are essential ingredients for wellbeing and thriving.

We need to work – not all work is paid or as part of a career (most is not) but every human needs meaningful, productive activity. Adam’s work in **Genesis 2** consisted of both manual activity (tending the garden, verse **15**) and intellectual activity (naming the animals, verse **19**) and the diversity is good for us. Idleness and boredom do not lead to flourishing, and unemployment and depression create a vicious cycle together.

We need relationships – we are not all of the same personality type and don't all interact with other people in the same way, but every human needs the intimacy that comes from mutual friendships. The only thing in the original creation said to be “*not good*” was Adam's loneliness (**Genesis 2:18**). We cannot expect to experience positive mental health without relationships. Since the church is, by definition, a family of different people, it has the unique opportunity to provide significant improvement in wellbeing to all sorts of people.

We need routine – God creates with rhythm and structure, bringing order out of chaos. Chaos isn't good for us! Our bodies and minds flourish best when kept in regular rhythms of good sleep, good diet and good exercise. Much of 21st century living makes this a great challenge, but without such rhythms we invite chaos and distress.

The doctrine of creation would remind us that we are creatures, not the Creator, and that to disregard His blueprint for our wellbeing is self-destructive.

B) The Fall

The idyllic scene of innocence at the end of **Genesis 2:25** is quickly shattered from **Genesis 3** onwards with the entrance of sin into humanity. Man's sin has cosmic repercussions, impacting human relationships (**3:16**) and work (**3:17-19**), and ultimately the entire creation is subjected in “*bondage to corruption*” (**Romans 8:21**). The world groans under sin and people become sick and die.

Consequently, we can say that all mental illness is ultimately due to sin, because all illness is ultimately due to sin. Had our first parents not disobeyed God, there would be no mental disorders. The doctrine of the Fall therefore teaches us the reason for the entrance of mental illness into our experience.

Sometimes we experience illness from our own specific sin – such as a drunkard who develops liver disease. Sometimes we become ill from

someone else's sin – such as the victim of domestic violence who suffers terrible bruising. And sometimes our illness comes purely because we live in a world under the corruption of sin – such as in the case of someone catching a common cold.

The same is also true of mental illness – specific individual sin can cause it, whether your own or someone else's; and the general effects of living in a fallen world can cause it. Sometimes the cause of mental illness may remain entirely hidden. When seeking to support those experiencing mental illness we must guard against making assumptions based on ignorance.

C) Redemption

From **Genesis 3:15** onwards the Bible presents the unfolding of God's plan to send someone who would crush the head of Satan. Just as sin's effects were cosmic, so would God's rescue plan be. Jesus came into the world to "*destroy the works of the devil*" (**1 John 3:8**) – all of them. Salvation is not only a spiritual matter about the forgiveness of our sins, but it is also a cosmic matter about the reconciliation of all things under Christ (see **Colossians 1:20**). Jesus' death and resurrection dealt with sin completely, including all its consequences.

Hence Matthew can conclude that Jesus' healing miracles are fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of the "man of sorrows" (**Matthew 8:16-17**). Did Jesus die to make us healthy? It is perhaps surprising to know that the answer is yes! Jesus died to rid us of mental illness, because Jesus died to deal with all that comes from sin. Whilst this may sound worryingly close to the "prosperity gospel", the difference is in the timing. The Bible certainly teaches that there is healing in the atonement, but it also teaches that our full experience of it awaits the life to come.

The Lord Jesus Christ experienced periods of overwhelming mental distress in His lifetime (e.g. **Matthew 27:46; Luke 19:41-44, 22:44**). The Bible presents to us a God who is near and personal – a God who

“gets” our suffering. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep and always intercedes for them ([John 10:11](#), [Hebrews 7:25](#)). The doctrine of redemption therefore teaches us that no matter how dark things may seem, there is always hope – because we have a God who has already dealt with sin, who identifies with us in our grief, who knows our need and who can bring good out of every situation.

D) Re-Creation

The New Testament clearly teaches that in the Lord Jesus Christ, the new creation has begun ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). And yet we still live in a world dominated by the corruption of sin. The new creation is therefore both “already” and “not yet”. This tempers our expectations and shapes our hope. Because of the “not yet” part, we know that illness of all forms will be a feature of this life; but because of the “already” part, we know that a day is coming when illness is completely eradicated.

The secular narrative offers very little hope to a person with chronic mental illness – things may not get better, and then you’ll die. By contrast the Bible’s message is brimming with hope – God will walk with you and be with you, even if things don’t seem to get better, but then there will come a day when He will wipe the last tears from your eyes (see [Revelation 21:4](#)). And not just that, but the entire creation will be “*set free*” ([Romans 8:21](#)). We have a wonderful and unrivalled hope.

E) Conclusion

The Christian message contained within the Bible offers insights into our understanding of mental illness that are both enormously helpful as well as being unique. We have a message of hope to proclaim that is not only true but good for everyone!