

Waiting for God – Psalm 38:15

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For I hope in Thee, O LORD; Thou wilt answer, O Lord my God. – Psalm 38:15

Psalm 38 is known as an individual lament. If the truth be told, it is a somewhat depressing psalm, because it was written at a time when David was experiencing intense anxiety, deep despair, overwhelming depression, and isolating loneliness. He is overcome with personal guilt, abandonment, and the anguish of his own soul. This throws him into an even deeper depression that paralyzes him from doing anything except groaning from the depths of his soul, *I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart* (38:8). Weakened by his depression he wants to do something to alleviate his condition, but he cannot. He no longer has a proper perspective on his situation. His mind and body are in conflict with each other, *My heart throbs, my strength fails me; and the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me* (38:10). But even in the midst of his depression David knows his theology and waits for God to respond to his desperate need, *For I hope* (i.e. “wait”) *for Thee, O LORD; Thou wilt answer, O Lord my God* (38:15).

According to statistics published by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety and depression are the most common mental illnesses in the United States, effecting 40 million adults or 18 percent of the population. One-half of all people diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with some sort of anxiety disorder. The annual financial cost is staggering at 42 billion dollars, with over half this, 22.84 billion, associated with the repeated use of healthcare services by people seeking treatment for symptoms that mimic physical illnesses. One category of depression, Major Depressive Disorder, is said to be the leading cause of disability in the United States for ages 15-44 years old, effecting 6.7 percent of the population, or 14.8 million people. An article published in the June 2012 journal of the American Psychological Association cited studies showing that one in five adults now take some form of psychotropic medication, spending more than 11 billion dollars on antidepressants alone.¹

So what does this have to do with a study of Waiting for God? Such statistics simply demonstrate how thoroughly the dogmas and presuppositions of secular psychology now dominate the thinking of the vast majority of people, and the extent to which the authority and sufficiency of Scripture has been overshadowed when it comes to matters pertaining to the soul. They demonstrate that rather than taking the time to search the Scriptures for the answer to their problems, most people, even most professing Christians, are willing to resort to the constantly shifting and innately subjective opinions of a field that is strewn with literally hundreds of obsolete and discarded models, all of which have one thing in common; they are all based on an evolutionary understanding of the development of man. And as a result they are wholly inadequate to provide any meaningful diagnosis or treatment for the issues which plague the soul of mankind. Even so-called “Christian” psychology is more often than not nothing more than secular psychology couched in biblical terminology. The

¹ <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/06/prescribing.aspx>

impotence of modern psychology to deal with issues of the soul is summed up by Dr. John Street,

Psychology's illegitimate efforts cannot come to absolute conclusions about life, since at its heart psychology is only one fallible man telling another fallible man what to do. Arrogance abounds in such an environment. Only the divinely inspired Word of God has authority to do that.²

Treating issues of the soul with psychology and medication may mask some symptoms, they may temporarily alleviate the pain, they may give some superficial relief, but they will never penetrate to the core issues which come from the heart and are a consequence of our sinful nature. Only God's word can "*restore the soul; make wise the simple; rejoice the heart; enlighten the eyes*" (Ps 19:7, 8). Only God's word can bring permanent, lasting peace to the soul. David did not look for immediate, superficial, and temporary solutions for his depression. He did not abandon his trust in God or his trust that God's word is able to do what God has promised it would do. He did not transfer his trust to the flawed, false, and failed opinions of man. David understood that the healing he longed for could only come from God, and it was a healing for which David was willing to expectantly and hopefully wait.

Unlike modern psychology David understood the real source of his depression. According to the majority of psychological models most of man's problems are the result of something external to himself – some emotional trauma, poor parenting, a dysfunctional family environment, social pressures, and the list could be endless – as the cause of a person's psychological problems. Many conclusions about human behavior are the result of animal studies, the assumption being that behaviors in animals will have similar expressions in humans due to a shared evolutionary legacy. Such assumptions, however, deny the fact that animals do not have a soul and are not created in the image of God. When theories are based on faulty assumptions then all the conclusions derived from them will be wrong and useless. While no one would deny that external circumstances can have a dramatic influence on a person's life, the circumstances themselves are not the cause of the behavior rather the behavior is a result of how a person responds to their circumstances. They can either respond in a biblical way or in an unbiblical way; in a sinful manner or in a way consistent with God's word; controlled by the flesh or controlled by the Spirit.

Many people are familiar with the tragic account of Phineas Gage, especially anyone who has ever taken a course in psychology. His story is found in virtually every psychology textbook. In 1848 Phineas was a twenty-five year old railroad worker who, while blasting rock, had a one-inch diameter steel rock-drill driven through his brain. The drill entered through his cheek and came out the front of his skull. The attending physician could insert one of his index fingers in the hole below Phineas' eye, and his other index finger in the hole in the top of Phineas' head and have his fingers touch. Amazingly Phineas survived but his behavior was drastically altered. This once gregarious, hard-working, responsible, personable, and pleasant young man became an irresponsible, abusive, swearing, hard-drinking man who could not hold a job or maintain relationships. According to psychology Phineas' brain trauma damaged the area of the brain that controls functions such as thinking, memory, and speech. In other words, morality is a physical and organic function,

² Dr. John Street, "Why Biblical Counseling and Not Psychology." in *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, John MacArthur and The Master's College Faculty (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 37.

not spiritual. Morality is an issue of biology, not the Bible.

There is no clear cause and effect between physical injury and immoral behavior. Many examples could be cited of people with similar injuries who have not sunk into immoral or abusive behavior and more could be cited of people who have suffered no injury and still sink into sinful practices and behavior. Why do some people with Alzheimer's and dementia become mean and surly while others are joyful and pleasant? This is why the desperate search for a so-called "gay" gene is futile, just as it would be to search for a fornication gene. The cause is spiritual, not organic, physical, or material.

Cases such as Phineas Gage prove nothing other than the biblical truth that the heart of man *"is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick;"* (Jer. 17:9). An injury can make it harder for a person to think clearly. Issues of the heart which a clear thinking person may have been able to suppress and resist now come to the surface and express themselves. The same is true that when the social stigma of sin is removed, or the fear of being caught is eliminated, so is the restraint. For example, in 1848 gold was discovered in California resulting in the Gold Rush of 1849 where tens of thousands of young men flooded the gold fields. Around them sprang up makeshift towns full of every kind of vice imaginable. Men who were normally upstanding, moral members of their community, active in their church, hardworking, and responsible citizens, when they found themselves in an environment where no one knew them and they were able to gamble, get drunk, curse, and frequent places of prostitution without the fear of being caught or damage to their reputation back home, jumped in with both feet. How many church-going young people "backslide" when they go to college and are given the opportunity to engage in immoral behavior without their parents or people from church being aware?

Cases such as Phineas Gage's, the testimony of history, and our own experience simply emphasize the necessity to *"watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life"* (Prov 4:23). Psychology points to external and physical sources as the root of most of our problems. In fact virtually every sin has been psychologized into some sort of disorder, disease, or syndrome for which we are not personally responsible. Sin can be eliminated by taking a drug. We have a pill for that!

The Bible, however, identifies the heart as the cause of all our problems (Gn 8:21; Jer 13:23; Mt 12:25; 15:18, 19; Mk 7:21-23). Our fallen, sinful nature and the sin which it generates is the source of all our problems. It is not particular sins, but sin that is the problem. Correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the One who created us, not humanistic psychology, knows best the source of our problems. The issue is spiritual, not physical. The hope that psychology offers is at best a false hope because it rests on an unbiblical foundation, and anything that is built on an unbiblical foundation will inevitably crumble thereby compounding a person's problems.

David's hope for peace of mind is not grounded in the unbiblical theories, opinions, and observations of man, no matter how scientific they may appear on the surface. Nor is his hope based on denying the reality of his condition, mystical views of God, wrong interpretations of Scripture, or wishful thinking. Even in his agony David is able to clearly discern and confess a cause and effect relationship for his severe depression, *"there is no health in my bones **because of my sin**, for my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me"* (Ps 38:3b-4). Because of his sin David feels God's hand of discipline on his life, *"For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, and Thy hand has pressed*

down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Thine indignation" (38:2-3a). Not all disease is associated with sin, but David clearly associates his depression with "*my iniquities*" and God's discipline.

Far from being a bad thing, David's depression is a sign of an active and alive conscience. The torment of a conscience under the convicting work of God's word is a burden no man or woman with an active conscience can bear. *For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Hb 4:12). See the effects of conscience in Cain, in David when confronted by Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-13; cf. Ps 51; Ps 32:1-5), in the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:17, 18, 29), in Judas. The condemnation of conscience is nothing else than the application of God's word to a person's life; either the universal application of God's law written on the heart of all mankind (Rm 2:14, 15), or the specific application of Scripture to specific individuals (Ac 2:37).

God's word curses all who violate it and conscience applies this curse to the guilty sinner. This was the effect of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. The people who heard Peter's message "*were pierced to the heart*" (Ac 2:37). The Greek word translated "pierced", *katanussomai*, appears only here in the entire Bible and describes the feeling of intense pain associated with anxiety, agitation, inner turmoil, and remorse. The voice of conscience is the voice of God, and people ignore it to their peril. Paul describes one of the characteristics of false teachers as "*being seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron*" (1 Tm 4:2). This is what enables them to teach false doctrines and ignore true doctrine. The great Puritan preacher John Flavel wrote,

In how sad a case are those that never felt any burden in sin, that never were kept waking and restless one night for sin. There is a *burdened* conscience, and there is a *benumbed* conscience. The first is more painful, but the last more dangerous. O it is a fearful blow of God upon man's soul, to strike it senseless and stupid, so that though mountains of guilt lie upon it, it feels no pain or pressure; and this is so much more sad, because it incapacitates the soul for Christ, and is a presage and forerunner of hell.³

We live in an age of "benumbed" conscience – where children can be murdered at will; where people have been desensitized to evil; where it is unfashionable to point out falsehood; where everyone's opinion is to be considered valid; where almost no behavior is to be labeled sinful; where everyone's belief is to be affirmed as legitimate; where virtually any lifestyle is to be accepted; where it is taboo to offend anyone or make anyone feel bad; where guilt is considered a psychologically harmful emotion – all to preserve our fragile ego, self-esteem, personal autonomy, and sense of self-importance. Even most preaching today is therapeutic in nature, designed to assuage and pacify the conscience, not prick and awaken the conscience, not hold up God's word, His law, His commands, His doctrines as a mirror to the soul and to testify against a person's conscience – but this is nothing new. Charles Spurgeon dealt with this same spirit of appeasement in his own time and addressed it in a sermon he preached in 1857 entitled *War of Truth* in which he stated,

We have to deal with a spirit, I know not how to denominate it, unless I call it a spirit of moderatism in the pulpits of protestant churches. Men have begun to rub off the rough edges of truth, to give up

³John Flavel, *The Method of Grace: How the Holy Spirit Works* (Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, 1997), 161.

the doctrines of Luther and Zwingli, and Calvin, and to endeavour to accommodate them to polished tastes. You might go into a Roman Catholic chapel now-a-days, and hear as good a sermon from a Popish priest as you hear in many cases from a Protestant minister, because he does not touch disputed points, or bring out the angular parts of our Protestant religion. Mark, too, in the great majority of our books what a dislike there is to sound doctrine! the writers seem to fancy that truth is of no more value than error; that as for the doctrines we preach, it cannot matter what they are; still holding that "He can't be wrong whose life is in the right."

There is creeping into the pulpits of Baptists and every other denomination, a lethargy and coldness, and with that a sort of nullification of all truth. While they for the most part preach but little notable error, yet *the truth* itself is uttered in so minute a form that no one detects it, and in so ambiguous a style, that no one is struck with it. So far as man can do it, God's arrows are blunted, and the edge of his sword is turned in the day of battle. Men do not hear the truth as they used to. The velvet mouth is succeeding to the velvet cushion, and the organ is the only thing in the building which giveth forth a *certain* sound. From all such things, "good Lord deliver us!" May heaven put an end to all this moderatism; we want out-and-out truth in these perilous days; we want a man just now to speak as God tells him, and care for nobody. Oh! if we had some of the old Scotch preachers! Those Scotch preachers made kings tremble; ... because each of them said, "God has given me a message; my brow is like adamant against men; I will speak what God bids me." Like Micah, they said, "As the Lord my God liveth, whatsoever my God saith unto me, that will I speak."

It is an old cliché, but history and experience prove it to be true, that soft preaching makes hard hearts; hard preaching makes soft hearts. Unless the unadulterated truth of God's word is brought to bear on the conscience people will never feel the weight of their sin, never see their hopeless and helpless condition, never despair of their own effort, never see the seriousness of their wound which can only be healed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and never cast themselves on the grace and mercy of the only One who can save them. As long as people seek to assuage their conscience, to anesthetize their conscience with drugs, to accumulate for themselves teachers according to their own desires, they will never see sin for what it is. They will never take sin seriously. Jesus is never sweet until sin is made bitter. Any peace they find is a false peace, which is more dangerous than their trouble for sin could ever be. There are two kinds of false peace which ruins most people – peace *in* sin, and peace *with* sin. Sadly the vast majority of the professing church today has succumbed to both.

David had a tender conscience. His conscience was informed by God's word. Even when he secretly cut off the edge of Saul's garment David's conscience bothered him because Saul was still "*the LORD's anointed*" (1 Sam 24:5, 6). His conscience found him out. This is why in Psalm 38 David calls his sin "*folly*" (38:5) because his sin had found him out (cf. Nm 32:23). In his current state of depression he cannot even pray in a meaningful way rather all David can do is "*groan*" and "*sigh*" (38:8, 9), his thoughts are not coherent. But David knows the God he serves and trusts. He knows that God sees the anguish of his soul, and that he feels the bitterness of his sin. David makes no excuses; he confesses his sin for what it is – sin – not a disease or disorder. He has no interest in defending himself against the accusations of conscience, "*Yes, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no arguments*" (38:14). Instead David patiently and expectantly waits, hopes, and trusts for the reconciliation promised by God to all, who in their utter hopelessness, helplessness, and sinfulness abandon themselves in total submission to Him. – *For I hope in Thee, O LORD; You wilt answer, O LORD my God.* – Psalm 38:15