

TGAT Anxiety and Depression: Psalm 88 & Rev 21:1-4

Good Morning everyone, my name is Tom. Today we are going to be talking about something that is very real and close to my heart. A problem that deeply effects our world, our country, and our church here in Peakhurst, and so something which we need to talk about, Anxiety and Depression. Before we kick off I want to establish a few things quickly. The first is that this is a huge issue and I am not able to cover it fully today, I am taking a little nibble out of what we really need to consume and so I have chosen particular elements of this issue that I think are a good place to begin and my intent is that this is a conversation starter for us and is in no way shape or form the final word on any of this. In preparation for today this sermon has been proof read and commented on by over thirty people, this has included long time sufferers, partners of long time sufferers, short term suffers, and health professionals. As you can imagine it was quite the barrage of feedback but I have found rewarding and helpful and it is my hope that it is for you today. My intent today is to stick as closely to scripture as possible to ensure we are grounded in the Word. As you can see I have chosen a particularly difficult Psalm to read and I have intentionally held off on our second reading for now because I want to let this one sit on our hearts. As I said a few weeks ago when I spoke on another psalm they are interesting because they are both people's expressions to God but also the word of God. I think that will help us as we consider this song today. Before we start I just want to affirm one thing. If you suffer from these conditions I want to strongly advise you to seek professional help and care. Before I talk about prayer and hope I want you to know that I am talking about those things alongside seeking medical and professional help, please reach out to your GP and see a counsellor. That is a good and godly thing to do.

Let me pray.

This is a real problem

First I want to spend a bit of time just orientating ourselves to this issue in society because I think a lot of people who haven't themselves suffered simply just don't know so here are some statistics:

Anxiety (SANE Australia):

- persistent, excessive or unrealistic worries (generalised anxiety disorder)
 - compulsions and obsessions which they can't control (obsessive compulsive disorder)
 - intense excessive worry about social situations (social anxiety disorder)
 - panic attacks (panic disorder)
 - an intense, irrational fear of everyday objects and situations (phobia).
- On average, 1 in 4 people – 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men – will experience anxiety. (ABS)
- Close to 3 per cent of people in Australia experience OCD in their lifetime (approx. 738,000 people)

- Up to 40 per cent of the population will experience a panic attack at some time in their life. (9.8 million Australians)

Depression: It involves low mood and/or loss of interest and pleasure in usual activities, as well as other symptoms. The symptoms are experienced most days and last for at least two weeks but becomes of clinical concern at about 4. Symptoms of depression interfere with all areas of a person's life, including work and social relationships. Depression can be described as mild, moderate or severe. (Beyond Blue)

- On average, around 1 in 6 women and 1 in 8 men will experience some level of depression.
- Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide.
- Three million Australians are currently experiencing anxiety or depression.
- *8 Australians are killed by suicide everyday.*

I don't think there is a conclusion we can come to other than that this is a problem. As Christian people we can't help but despair for our world when we see that something like this is happening to people. The brokenness of the world affects everything and that includes people's mental health. We need to understand that this is an issue that we have to engage with, that affects people sitting in this room right now, and so we need to do what we always do when dealing with the fractured nature of God's creation, look at the Bible.

The Psalm we read this morning possibly took a lot of you by surprise. Lots of you possibly didn't know it was in there. So different from the Psalms we normally read, "the Lord is my Shepherd". In fact this Psalm is different to all the others. It is a Psalm of Lament, a Psalm of sadness, fear, worry, despair, but this one is different to the other Psalms of Lament in the Bible. Because this one doesn't have the expected happy ending that we are waiting for, the "but I trust in your unfailing love" moment no instead we simply have the line "Darkness is my closest friend". But, how can this person feel this way when they know God, how can they despair all the way through, how can they accuse God in this way, and how can all this be the word of God given to us in the Bible?

This is a prayer you are allowed to pray.

My friends, the answer, is because in a world broken by sin, in the world the Psalmist lived in, for a lot of people in the world today, including a lot of Christians, this is reality. These are authentic feelings felt in the faith experience of millions of people throughout history. Anxiety, despair, hopelessness, depression. These are real feelings that followers of God experience and they are true feelings and I want to affirm that. My friends if you read this Psalm this morning and it was literally how you feel written on a page I want you to know something. That is ok. You, as a follower, a disciple, a lover of Jesus and the grace he has given you, you are allowed to feel this way. Because sometimes things are just hard, and sometimes they are hard for a long time, sometimes your brain isn't working how it should and it's causing you immense pain and sadness. You are in good company in the word of God. You know why there isn't a happy inspiring end to this psalm? Because life isn't that simple, the life of a Christian isn't that simple. You know what I love about this Psalm, it shows me the bible isn't some irrelevant book from thousands of years ago, it shows me

that it is real, it doesn't pretend things are perfect, it knows that they are not and it expresses that.

³I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.

⁴I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.

¹³But I cry to you for help, LORD;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴Why, LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

These are words that you are allowed to pray, that when you feel, are good for you to prayer. People may accuse this Psalmist of having a lack of faith in expressing these feelings but it is the opposite because who are they taking these feelings to? They are taking them straight to God. Who has felt like God isn't listening, who has felt like God is hiding from them? Lots of people I'd say. Take it to him, tell him how you feel, the fact you are taking it to him is a great act of faith in itself. A close friend told me this week that their experience is that depression tells them what a terrible fake Christian they must be if they are so depressed. That to constantly be feeling despair means they are not doing it right. So I want the first big takeaway today to be clear, I want to affirm your faith, I want to affirm who you are in Christ, I want you to know that it is okay to feel how you feel, and it is very good to tell God exactly that.

This is a community experience

There are lots of people in this room who have never struggled the way that this Psalm is expressing. Praise God for that. But there is a message for you here too. Have a look at the title of the Psalms. This is a song. A song in Israel's hymnbook. And so it is something that was sung. Do you think everyone who sung this song was experiencing these feelings? No way. What does reading this Psalm as a group here at church like we did do? What does praying this Psalm do for people who don't feel this way. It gives you a window into the experience of other people in the community and helps you to understand. These are not experiences to be suffered by the individual of church but issues which we must stand in solidarity together even if they are not my experiences they are the experiences of my brothers and sisters and I will walk with them. I will pray these things for them.

This psalm shows us how complex and maybe unexpected the nature of these struggles can be and I think provide us with understanding that will help us care for each other.

So first, here's my list of things to avoid saying which were almost universally given to me and supported by the people I got feedback from. These may surprise you because I think they are mistakes that even the most loving Christians make. These are super general but are things I have experienced and when I was asking people what was unhelpful for them they said this.

- “You need to just get on with it. Find the problem and deal with it.” This may help someone who has a specific thing that is causing them stress. But someone with Anxiety and Depression are not in control of things in that way, in the same way that someone with a broken arm isn’t in control of whether or not their arm is broken. They are both medical issues that need medical help. The sufferer of course holds responsibility for their health and therefore for following their treatment plan to help themselves like rehab for a shoulder there is a lever of responsibility. But to suggest they can just deal with it suggests a normal state of mind to process information. A few people described their state of mind like being trapped in fog, disorientated. Help is needed. Saying get on with it doesn’t help them because they aren’t able to.
- “Just remember the Salvation and Joy you have in Christ”. It seems like a really good thing to say. But the chances are the person is well aware of that. The writer of Psalm 88 is definitely aware of the character of God. Its generally not an issue of faith and so we need to avoid making it one. As I referenced before they are probably already feeling guilt in this sense. And so when we say things like this it can be hurtful.
- “Things are going to get better”. You don’t know that. It might be more like back pain which is lifelong and can be managed but is always present. A psalm that ends with “Darkness is my only friend” definitely doesn’t back up that things will get better. And so if things don’t get better then they may struggle to trust you next time.

So what should we do for our friends who are suffering in this way? First, we listen to them, we pray with them, we walk with them, we check up on them, and we listen to them. And through this we hand over the other side of the treatment to God. We don’t treat people, God treats people, and often he uses health professionals to do that. Our role is to be a friend to them. To love them and to listen to them. And to relentlessly pray for them and not just when we are with them but all the time. To go to God, to read this Psalm and beg God to help them. That is the most loving and best thing you can do.

Second, if someone shares with you that they are suffering in this way and it sounds like its been happening for a while, you must advise them to see professional help. You must. If you are not a professional counselor then you are not equipped to help someone properly, and so don’t give people advice, your advice is for them to seek help. Leave the advice and the treatment to the people trained for it. So first we need to use the incredible gift of modern medicine that God has blessed us with.

And third, this is a really important one, this has been key for me in caring for others. Supporting someone can be a difficult and tiring experience and there’s no quick fix. Pray against fatigue and resentment and anger in yourself. Research what these illnesses are to understand what impact they might have on you and don’t become subject to misunderstanding and misinformation. You may need to be there for them for the rest of their lives. Don’t burn out early and get help if you need it too.

Reading Rev 21:1-4

The only hope we truly have

I decided that I wanted to move to Revelation not because we couldn't leave the sermon at Psalm 88, I think we could, but I didn't want to. I wanted to come here to consider the hope that we have, a hope that doesn't fix these things right now but it is the reason we continue to follow God even though we have these struggles even when people around us have these struggles. The one time in history that we can point to and know that it will be better when verse 4 There will be no more death^(a) or mourning or crying or pain.

The Apostle John sees what is to come in this vision he is receiving in the Book of Revelation. Look at the passage. Just before this part evil is taken from the earth and cast into the lake of fire and now we see a time when heaven will descend onto earth, when all things will be made new and when importantly the old order of things will pass away. This is a hope in the knowledge that the effects of sin in the world, on creation, on relationships, on our minds will be dealt with by God and his people will be with him. Here at Church at the Peak we don't offer a quick fix to the brokenness of the world and our lives, we know that until the return of Jesus we will still have to deal with these horrible conditions.

But for those of us who follow Jesus we know something important, we know that our God loves us so much, so much that we can go to him with these things like the psalmist in psalm 88, we can cry out to him, we can doubt him, we can question whether he's there and he will still love us. For the followers of Jesus our brokenness our struggles, our hopelessness, our doubts, never change the fact that we are loved by him, our salvation is independent of our helplessness, of our weaknesses, they never change the truth of what has been done for us and therefore where we are going. It's a hope that doesn't fix anxiety and depression, it simply gives the strength we need to endure in spite of the suffering we face.

For those of us who know Jesus, we are all walking towards this promise together described in Revelation 21. Some of us will struggle in different ways, and we need to stand together in that, praying, understanding, caring. Taking advantage of the gift of modern medicine and continually pointing to the hope that we have, yes it seems far away and it may be long before it is realised. It is the only truth that we have to give people who need hope, but it is the only truth worth knowing in this world.