



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



I HAVE A PSYCHIATRIC DIAGNOSIS

WHAT DOES THE
BIBLE SAY?

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Chapter 1

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Right now you are here: panic disorder, depression, anorexia, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, trauma, substance abuse, bipolar disorder. You are carrying a heavy burden—you or someone you love has a psychiatric diagnosis.

You want to find your way to here:

- What does God say?
- How does the Bible speak in ways that can help you find wisdom, rest, and hope in Jesus, even with a psychiatric diagnosis?

That path is not always easy. It's as if there are walls between psychological problems and God's words. Therapists and psychiatrists don't talk about God; Scripture doesn't have a list of psychological diagnoses. Two different worlds. One science, the other spiritual. Maybe they each have their own areas of expertise and don't need to be bridged. Maybe?

Still, we have to do *something*. The troubles described by psychiatric diagnoses are life dominating. They can be our most pressing problems. It just doesn't make sense that God is relatively silent on something so important.

And we know he is not silent. God, we can be sure, hears and has compassion for us in this pain. Hear his words to us: “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13a). He is the “God of all comfort” who comforts in a way that our comfort can even overflow to others (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). He is the Lord whose comfort brings peace in all kinds of troubles. (The evidence for Scripture’s words to suffering people is the hundreds of fine books on suffering. A sample of these appears at the end of the book.)

Jesus says, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV). We know that when Jesus says “overcome” he does not mean complete physical healing and the eradication of all trouble in this life. But he does mean that the life he has given us will reach into the darkness we so often feel (John 10:10), and hope will push back despair.

Do you have doubts about this? Jesus responds to those doubts. He promises—he even swears—that he gives us his presence and power because of what he has done in his death and resurrection (Matthew 28:20). Still have your doubts? He gently points to well-fed birds and colorful daylilies. God cares for them, he says. “Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26). If God knows the details of common birds and flowers, which can last only a day, he certainly knows and cares about what troubles you. If comfort seems slow to come, he invites you to ask, “When will you comfort me?” (Psalm 119:82). He will certainly hear you and will bring comfort and much more.

What you need is for these truths to break into your psychological struggles. Your well-being and spiritual growth are at stake.

Notice what occurs with a word such as *trauma*. You think about chronic abuse or a gruesome event that etched an indelible mark of death on someone's mind and body. Those past events intrude into present life, as if they *are* present. Sometimes they intrude as vivid flashbacks. A mere scent, a noise, a word, a scene in a movie, and your body abruptly shuts down and hopes to numb you from the threat. When you want help, your thoughts might go to relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and careful attention to your breathing, though you would settle for staying alive through the storm.

What you *do not* think is what God says about trauma. Since the word *trauma* doesn't appear in Scripture, it seems as though he has little to say about it. His words are *spiritual*, and spiritual resides in a different world than *psychological problems*. Spiritual, we think, is about heaven. It is for later, not now.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL

Just a word on the terms *psychological* and *spiritual*. *Psychological* and *psychiatric problems* are often used interchangeably. They refer to disruptive thoughts and feelings that interfere with our relationships, growth, and work. They typically assume that both our bodies and the destructive acts of other people are the primary causes. Many of these difficult experiences have been catalogued in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* of the American Psychiatric Association.¹ They include depressive disorders, bipolar, anxiety, schizophrenia, trauma, and many others. *Psychiatric* suggests that medication might be used as a treatment. *Psychological* promotes nonmedical

strategies to manage emotions, revise hazardous thought patterns, and direct the course of relationships.

These terms have been contrasted with *spiritual problems*. If we have a spiritual problem, we usually think that we are supposed to read our Bible and pray. Or, perhaps we are hard-hearted and rebellious, and our heavenly future could be in jeopardy. With that perspective, psychological and spiritual problems dwell in two different worlds because psychological problems cannot be reduced to a rebellious heart or cured by mere spiritual disciplines. Scripture, however, suggests that *spiritual* is much more than these.

Scripture speaks to both the physical and relationally traumatic causes that are of prime interest in psychological and psychiatric problems. God has created us physical beings, and Scripture certainly accounts for body and brain disabilities that inevitably affect us all. God speaks about our bodies. Watch for the word *weak* as a common way that Scripture refers to physical struggles. For example, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh [i.e., the body] is *weak*” (Mark 14:38, emphasis added). In other words, though we might intend to stay up late and pray, our bodies do not always cooperate with our good intentions. This means that, in our care for each other, we recognize that thoughts, feelings, and actions can be affected by our bodies, which could mean lack of sleep, strokes, the side effects of medication, and even all kinds of possible chemical or anatomical problems in the brain that presently avoid detection.

Scripture is also about our relationships: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD (Jeremiah 23:1). Violence, in word and deed, destroys. God sees us when others have

sinned against us, and God speaks to us when we have been victimized by violent acts. The occasion for many of the psalms is oppression and violence, in which the psalmists, speaking for us all, are at the end of themselves, and they turn to God for strength, help, and justice.

Spiritual problems go deep. They are matters of our spirit for which we need the Spirit. We might benefit from medication and other treatments, but we need God and his Spirit above all else. Let's consider this more carefully.

A spiritual problem has to do with your spirit. Your spirit is the real you—all things good, bad, confused, painful, uncertain, worth celebrating, your loves, your doubts, your shame, and whatever you hope to keep secret. You will notice other words substitute for *spirit*, such as *heart*, *mind*, and *soul* (*heart* is the most common). They all identify beliefs held most dearly, the emotions that express true desires, and the effects of broken relationships that seem to descend on every moment of life. They also identify the center of our being, in which life is lived before God and we need him. Spiritual problems extend more broadly than we first imagine.

In your spirit

- You can be crushed by the words of another (Proverbs 15:4).
- You need to be revived (Isaiah 57:15).
- You face emotions and desires that can control you, so you want to learn how to rule them more than be ruled by them (Proverbs 16:32).
- You can be deceived by your emotions. Sometimes you need to listen to them; other times they lie to you

about who you are—falsely saying that you are a hopeless case, you will never change, you will always feel this way, and no one cares (Proverbs 19:2).

- You can be much less secure than you let on, and wish there was someone whom you could trust and could actually help and protect (Luke 12:32).
- You can hate people who have wronged you and love them at the same time (Psalm 55:12–14).
- You wonder if God hears or sees or cares. You wonder if he is angry at you. You worry that he does not like you (Psalm 10:1).
- You don't need to know everything about tomorrow, but you do need help in how to live today (Psalm 25:4).
- You learn how you can be strong and alive even when your body and brain are imposing real hardships (Philippians 4:12–13).

In your spirit, you are also given power by the Spirit, who is the only one with access to your deepest thoughts and struggles, and who alone can truly help. Spiritual problems mean that you need God: Father, Son, and Spirit. Life is too much to manage on your own. You cannot afford to be partitioned from him. You could say that spiritual problems are reasons to pray—and you pray for everything, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

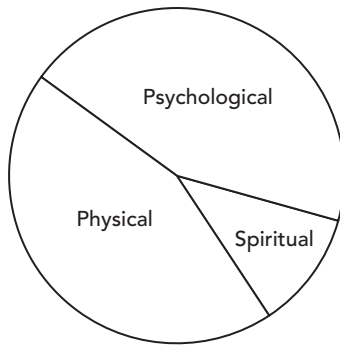
Cancer, for example, is included in “everything.” In the midst of medical treatments, we pray for healing and physical strength. *Spiritual* includes this and goes deeper yet. We are grateful for effective medical treatments, but

we also know we cannot put our hope in them because nothing on earth wholly rescues us from death or brings peace. Cancer raises issues of life and death, purpose, endurance, the goodness of God, and life *after* death, and God's words go even to these places.

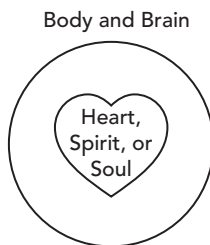
Spiritual deepens our understanding of psychological problems. The two categories are not actually opposed. Psychological categories help us see important human struggles. Spiritual categories include those struggles and help us see more. Spiritual indicates that God speaks in every detail of our lives, and we *need* him in every detail. Psychological therapies see fear and anxiety as an occasion to think differently—"I have no good reason to think that the bridge will fall when I am on it"—or dull the intense physical experiences through medication or other techniques that bring our attention to the present rather than the future. They cannot see that fear and anxiety need the right person, who is present, strong and trustworthy. They miss that we can put our trust in things and people (including ourselves) that cannot bear such confidence. They miss that we were created to be close to God, and, when the Spirit of God brings us close, everything changes.

YOU ARE AN EMBODIED SOUL, NOT A PIE CHART

A common way to picture the difference between psychological and spiritual is they are two different pieces of a whole, the third piece being the physical, the realm of the body and brain. The psychological has laid claim to how we feel, how we think, how we live with others, and disruptions in any of these (fig. 1). The spiritual is left with obedience and hope for heaven, both of which can seem unrelated to psychological problems.

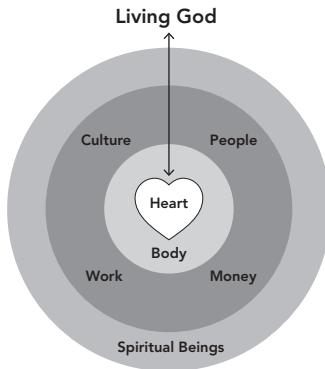
Figure 1. A Common View of the Person

Now reimagine your theological x-ray. You are, indeed, a physical being, as represented by the circle in figure 2. Your body and brain are you, and they shape and influence both your feelings and thoughts. But your heart (spirit or soul) goes deeper. Here are your true desires, where you direct the course of your life. Here is where God gives life even when your body and brain are weakened or broken. Here is where peace, comfort, and hope can reside even during the complicated storms of life, or even storms of the brain and body. Here is where your God speaks to everything.

Figure 2. The Embodied Soul

If we were to add more to this theological picture, we—body/spirit—are surrounded by a world that shapes us. It includes people and their impact, for good and bad, our work, our money, the culture in which we were raised, and an endless number of other influences. Even more, it includes spiritual beings, some who protect and others who have declared war (fig. 3).

Figure 3. The Person and Examples of Life's Influences



The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper described our life this way: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” This means that we want to bring our psychological or psychiatric problems, which have been living apart from God’s words, back to our home in Jesus Christ, and hear how he cares about the details of our lives. In this place he speaks hope to the depressed soul and rest to the anxious heart. He is the rock for those who feel like the present is overwhelming and confusing. From the vantage point of

God's kingdom, from where he says "Mine," everything is clearer and tinted with hope.

We will continue to gather reliable information and help from the world around us. Such help can have real benefits. Physical struggles might benefit from medical and physical treatments, and the consequences of broken relationships can be seen more clearly through the descriptions found in many good books. But, when God says "Mine," we gain everything as we reenvision our psychological problems. Careful observations, like those of the mental health sciences, help us to see important things; Scripture reveals what is *most* important. It opens our eyes to what is unseen and eternal.

A PLAN

Here is our basic approach.

- Listen to God and get help from his people.
- Listen and learn from those who have experience.

Their order is not important, though we should always give God the final word.

Your work might begin when you learn something about a psychiatric diagnosis from those with experience. These sources can include friends, therapists, doctors, and reliable materials. You recognize yourself or someone you love in the descriptions—"OCD," "bipolar disorder," "borderline," and so on—and those words are important. They help you identify something for which you previously had no words. They might even bring a measure of relief. You feel known. "That's me." You finally feel

understood. It is difficult to do anything until you put those hard-to-express experiences into speech.

What next? Listen to God. What does he say? What does *Scripture* say? These questions will remind you to bring what you have learned back to God's house, where you listen to him and his people. Here, the words you have heard in the world around you will be reshaped and you will see more. Scripture, it turns out, functions as corrective lenses that open your eyes.

These two approaches anchor the rhythm in what is ahead—listen to Scripture and God's people, listen to those who have experience, listen to what God says. Back-and-forth. Listen, learn, ask for help. The cycle continues until you understand your struggles (or another's struggles) better and have ways to help. What is important is that Scripture has the final words of hope.

GOD'S WORDS TO YOU

There will be times when you bring what you have heard back to Scripture, and you hear nothing. At those times, here are words you can count on.

- Jesus says, "Speak to me."
- Jesus says, "Believe the gospel."

These will be your entrance into God's house.

"Speak to Me"

When in doubt, start here. Life with God is an intimate and life-giving conversation. That's what you do in the best of human relationships. When something is hard,

confusing or painful—when you experience trouble—you talk to a good friend, and Jesus calls his people friends (John 15:13–15).

That is *much* harder than it seems. We can speak to a good friend about our troubles. That is natural and even instinctive to our human nature. But it takes practice to talk to the Lord. We might ask for help when we are desperate, but we struggle to tell him the matters that are on our hearts. We don't know how to simply talk to him.

Try this: “Jesus, this is just so hard. I don't even know where to begin.” Just talk. There are no particular rules. It is enough to know that Jesus listens and responds when you speak. He hears you and acts. You might not see him in action immediately, but you will.

“Pour out your heart,” he says (Psalm 62:8). In response, his people have had plenty to say.

For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
 I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
 I am a man who has no strength,
 like one set loose among the dead. (Psalm 88:3–5a)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. (Psalm 130:1)

An idea: When you talk about your present struggles, instead of using a technical term for whatever troubles you, such as *depression* or *bipolar*, use your own words and be as descriptive as you can. What is it like for you? What image captures it? Does it feel like darkness? Being taken hostage? Your body is a stranger? Think about what words you want to say, and then speak them to God and other people.

Your work has begun in earnest. A small but important step. You have taken a private pain or concern and made it public. You have openly expressed your need. Once you have done this with the Lord, you will notice that you can speak more freely to other people. You will speak similar words to a friend. You might ask someone to pray for you. When you speak from your heart to the Lord, conversations with other people are sure to follow, and God will use many of those conversations. The words and questions from other people will help you, and you, through your openness and willingness to talk to Jesus, will help them.

The Lord invites you to speak to him and his people, which will open the door to many more words he will speak. These words will cluster around, “Believe the gospel.”

“Believe the Gospel”

The apostle Paul summarizes the gospel this way: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1a, 3–4).

The gospel is a person. Jesus is the message that God has forgiven our sins because Jesus identified with us and died the death that we deserved so we could be brought close to God forever. This gospel is about the real us—our spirit—and about our suffering. From this beginning are all the benefits we have from being connected to Jesus, such as his comfort and power. Through this gospel we are changed by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to

all who believe. His power can be found in those who have learned contentment, thankfulness, and even joy, although their circumstances did not improve. His power can be found in those who speak to him even when he seems far away, who love others even when they feel empty and lifeless. Whatever form that power takes, we could say the result of being filled with God's power is that his people are more alive. We are invited to press this gospel into every detail of our lives and watch his power enter into our weakness and pain.

All this follows an ancient tradition. The apostle Paul illustrated that pattern even to the first New Testament churches: "when I came to you . . . I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1–2). This does not mean that his sermons were short, or that he answered every question, "Christ crucified." Paul means that Christ crucified, risen, and reigning is the heart of God's wisdom, so he committed himself to connecting every challenging detail of life to this center. Those connections are not always obvious to us, but a wise person searches for them because Jesus Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24b). We will use that strategy.

For this work, we should get help from others who know people and know God. That is an essential part of God's plan. We learn in dependence on God and with other people's help. No human being is self-sufficient. Instead, we were intended to need one another. Henri Nouwen wrote of his own struggles, "I realized that healing begins with our taking our pain out of its diabolic isolation and seeing that whatever we suffer, we suffer it in communion with all of humanity."² In other words,

we talk about our struggles with others. We are part of a multifaceted body, with each person bringing gifts that uniquely serve, and we need those gifts.

Then you broaden your search again. You talk to the world around you. You listen to those who have expertise in your particular problem. You ask questions. You learn from those who have *had* troubles like your own or seen troubles like your own. You listen, talk, ask. These can all contribute to your growth as you make it a point to always bring what you learn back to God's house where you hear his words.

Up ahead are four fairly common terms that come from psychiatry and psychotherapy: anxiety and panic disorder, trauma, depression, and narcissism. Each will bring its own particular challenges as you talk to the Lord and learn what he says to you in Scripture. The plan is that, once you develop the habit of returning to God's house and his words, you will be able to turn to him for meaningful help with all kinds of psychological—that is, spiritual—struggles.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does the theological x-ray of the embodied soul make sense? It is one way to assemble a few biblical teachings into one diagram. The most important application of the embodied soul diagram is that God is in the center of everything. The rest of the book will illustrate how to see that God, indeed, is the center of our lives and the very center of our world.
2. The apostle Peter wrote, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and

godliness” (2 Peter 1:3a). God’s words say more than we will ever comprehend. How are you learning that in other areas of your life, such as in your relationships and your own daily troubles?