



WHEN DAY BECOMES NIGHT

In preparing this talk I came across a children's poem last week, by Shel Silverstein. It's called *Mr Grumbledump*:

*Everything's wrong, Days are too long,
Sunshine's too hot, Wind is too strong.
Clouds are too fluffy, Grass is too green,
Ground is too dusty, Sheets are too clean.
Stars are too twinkly, Moon is too high,
Water's too drippy, Sand is too dry.
Rocks are too heavy, Feathers too light,
Kids are too noisy, Shoes are too tight.
Folks are too happy, Singin' their song.
Why can't they see it? Everything's wrong!*

A funny description of what it feels like to be depressed! And today's psalm sounds a little similar, in places:

Psalm 38

What is this psalm doing in the Bible? It's not exactly the happiest song in the world, is it? No, it isn't – but we need to hear it. Because if the stats are right, at some point 1 in 4 of us will feel as though we're living the lyrics to *Fix You* (I certainly have). And God's people are not immune. In fact, it's naïve to think otherwise (and as Tim Keller says, naïveté can be just as dangerous as sickness itself).

Now this psalm is one of a handful of 'songs of lament' that deal specifically with sickness – in this case, clinical depression. All the symptoms are here: sorrow, fatigue, pain, palpitations, loneliness, guilt, despair, paranoia. But in amongst the negatives there are some positives too, for all of us. What then are the positives of depression?

1) It Can Be A Place Of Prayer (vs1-4). What kind of prayer? In David's case, one big moan. Or groan (vs8)! But sometimes that's what our truest prayers can sound like - 'Urrgghh!' And that may be how the Spirit works, according to Romans ch8. The point here is: God is big enough to take our moans and groans and shouts and screams and tears and tantrums and raspberries, because He's more interested in honesty than sentence structure or religious vocab. It's also an answer to those people who say, "God's got better things to do than listen to me." Maybe, maybe not - but He wants to listen anyway. So, talk (or go 'Urrgghh!', if that's what floats your boat).

2) It Can Be A Place Of Power (vs5-8). Now you might be thinking David sounds anything but strong ("I am feeble and utterly crushed", he says). But we're not talking *David's* strength here: we're talking God's. And God allows David, a man of strength, to become weak, in order to teach him something: that God is God, and we are not – and that He is bigger than this. Depression is often referred to as 'the disease of the strong', because the people most likely to suffer it are those who think they won't. But if we learn to listen, to our bodies or loved ones, we'll be stronger than before. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:10, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

3) It Can Be A Place Of Presence (vs9-12). Another 'symptom' of depression is loneliness, and again, David knows how that feels: his friends have deserted him, while others are talking about him behind his back. Back in David's day, if you were ill people would often ostracise you, in case they caught it or became 'unclean' or tainted. And depressed people can often experience something similar. But in the midst of it all David reaches out to the One who is still there, who knows everything (vs9). It may be more a statement of faith than a feeling, but David leans into God. Sometimes we don't realise how much we need God until the crutches are taken away.

4) It Can Be A Place Of Patience (vs13-16). David compares himself to someone who can neither hear nor speak. The reason? He's been praying and praying but not getting through, like his prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. So, he tells God, "I'm not going anywhere, LORD, coz You're gonna answer me!" – not the most godly-sounding prayer in the world. But even so, David remains faithful; he's 'developing perseverance' (James 1:3-4). Sometimes, the issues behind depression can take time to work through, and that can cause immense frustration – so we might end up saying stuff like this. But God is God, not because *we* are perfect, but because *He* is.

5) It Can Be A Place Of Progress (vs17-20). David comes to the conclusion he has brought this on himself ("I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin"). Now in the ancient world, it was common to assume that if you fell ill, God was angry with you about something. But one of the things that Scripture teaches us is: that's not always or often the case (e.g.

Job chs1-2). However, sometimes - *sometimes* - our attitudes and priorities can contribute to, or even trigger, our sickness. The way we feel doesn't come from nowhere - it comes from how we think, how we see things, how we process the world. But as our thinking changes, so does our health – mental, and emotional.

Man Of Sorrows

So, God inspired David to write this song, his very own *Coldplay* number, in part to help David – but also to help us. You may not understand why you're going through what you're going through at this moment, but God does.

Now we've looked a lot today at depression from the perspective of the sufferer. But if you're living with a depressive, that can be tough. Here are some pointers:

- Be there, even when it's hard. They need you.
- Listen well. You may benefit from it yourself one day.
- Set boundaries. You need to look after yourself, too.
- Encourage them to seek professional help.

And a final thought: the psalm ends with a kind of half-prayer, that God will not abandon David in this place. Now we know from the historical narratives in the Bible that God never did, even though it might have felt like it sometimes. And He hasn't abandoned you, either. How do we know? Because in the final 24 hours of Jesus' life, Jesus became a 'man of sorrows', as Isaiah 53 puts it – He became a 'Mr Grumbledump' – who took all of our darkness onto Himself, on the cross. And He could have abandoned you, but He didn't. He didn't abandon you in Gethsemane, He didn't abandon you before the Sanhedrin, He didn't abandon you before Pilate, He didn't abandon you at Calvary.

He won't abandon you now.

So, if you find yourself in a place of intense darkness, if your spirit feels overwhelmed and broken, if you feel as though you're falling, hold on. He's got you.

Hold on.