

Veronica Zundel

Crying for the Light

I bring this candle,
I acknowledge the darkness...

Bible readings
and reflections
for living with depression



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Introduction

This is a book about depression and other forms of emotional distress or mental illness. Why another book on this topic? And can books help anyway? Those are fair questions. Reading may be our only escape from depression, or it can seem like just one more burden when our concentration is shot to pieces by our illness or the medication we take for it.

I suppose I am writing this because I am mostly in the first category: I love to read something, fiction or non-fiction, which tells me that someone else has been through what I have been through. My poem 'Put a name' (which you will find in my story on page 72) was inspired by reading a novel, written in the late 19th century, whose heroine was suffering from unrequited and hopeless love. For me, that experience was significant because I had read any number of novels portraying this pain from a male viewpoint, but this was the first I had read that portrayed it so accurately from a young female viewpoint. As unrequited love is one of my great hobbies, I felt recognized and affirmed.

I have suffered from depression for nearly 35 years, and have been medicated for it intermittently for the last 30 and constantly for the last 15. I am also a writer: writing is one of the things I enjoy most in my life, and it seemed logical to bring together my writing and my experience of depression and breakdown. As one of my main writing jobs is writing comments on the Bible, helping people to find reflections of and on their own lives in

its words, it also seemed logical for part of this book to consist of reflections on the Bible, along with prayers, poems and liturgy inspired both by life and by the Bible.

This is not a self-help book, a medical textbook or a complete guide to the alien land of depression or mental illness. There are plenty of books like those already. It is more of an attempt to tell one Christian's story, to hear the voices of others with similar experiences, and to discover whether the Bible can both echo our experience and play a part in healing our wounds.

What it's all about

In this introduction, I want to give a brief outline of depression and related illnesses, and explain the structure of this book.

The first thing to say—and it can never be repeated too often—is that depression is an illness. So are bipolar disorder, psychosis, schizophrenia, personality disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or anything else with which the readers (and writer) of this book may be diagnosed. These illnesses are not demon possession, they are not signs of lack of faith, and they generally are not going to be healed by more prayer, or by pronouncing them the work of the devil or their sufferers to be more sinful than others.

Most sensible Christians, if presented with someone who has cancer, a broken leg or a chest infection, will tell the sufferer to go to the doctor. They may also pray or advise the other person to pray, but they will not

prescribe prayer as an alternative to medical help. Why should it be any different with illnesses of the mind?

Depression is an illness of the mind and emotions. So are all the other illnesses I have listed above. Some are more easily treated than others but all can be medically identified and medically alleviated, if not cured.

I'm not going to say a lot about mental illness in general, because I'm not qualified to do so, and there are other places where you can get this information (some are listed in the Resources section at the end of the book). My late brother, who died at his own hand in the 1970s, had a mental illness that was never adequately diagnosed, although I suspect it might nowadays be called generalized anxiety disorder—but that is the only other mental health problem of which I have direct experience. Depression is the only one I have experienced from the inside, so I will say a little about that.

Depression is of two kinds: reactive (caused by an identifiable external event or situation) and endogenous (having no obvious outside cause). It is characterized by symptoms such as:

- ❖ general lowness of mood
- ❖ numbness, lack of enjoyment
- ❖ anxiety
- ❖ irritability
- ❖ uncontrollable weeping or inability to cry
- ❖ inability to do tasks that are usually easy
- ❖ difficulty being in company or difficulty being alone
- ❖ inability to concentrate
- ❖ panic attacks

- ❖ difficulty sleeping, or difficulty staying awake
- ❖ loss of appetite, or 'comfort eating'
- ❖ loss of sexual feelings
- ❖ an overwhelmingly negative view of life or one's own life

A sufferer may have all of these symptoms or only one or two. There can also be physical symptoms like nausea, stomach ache, 'butterflies', facial 'twitches', muscle tension and hand tremors.

Depression can be mild or severe; it can be accompanied by frightening symptoms such as dissociation (going off into a 'world of one's own' for some time, impervious to external stimuli), sudden mood swings, irrational fears, self-harm, intrusive thoughts, violent compulsions towards oneself or others, or suicidal feelings. It can also be a cause, or a byproduct, of alcohol or drug abuse or eating disorders.

Some people think that depression is caused by chemical changes in the brain, some that those chemical changes are a result of depression. Either way, depression generally goes together with chemical or hormonal changes in the brain, which means that taking medications that alter brain chemistry can relieve or even cure it.

Things that help

Treatment for depression, as for other psychiatric illnesses, can take various forms. Anti-depressants or

other medications prescribed by a doctor (such as anti-psychotics or lithium for mood swings) can transform some people's lives. There should be no more shame in taking these medicines than there is in taking antibiotics for an infection or insulin for diabetes. Medication may be prescribed by a general practitioner or a psychiatrist, according to the severity and length of the illness.

Sometimes, medication just gets us to the point of being ready to try one of the bewildering array of 'talk therapies'. Counselling, or psychotherapy, comes in a huge variety of forms. Some are based on talk alone, while others include work on how we relate to and use our bodies, or the therapeutic use of art or music, or work in groups, or ways of 'dramatizing' our situation—such as Gestalt therapy, in which we talk to a chair representing significant people in our life. (The Resources section includes ways of finding out about different therapies.)

The terms 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' are sometimes used interchangeably, which can be confusing. I prefer to use the term 'counsellor' for those who have had some training in understanding people in general, well or ill, and who provide a safe space for us to consider our life and choices and perhaps give us some advice. 'Psychotherapist' is a term I would rather reserve for those who have had considerable training in one or more of the classic or more modern forms of therapy used to treat people who have been diagnosed by a doctor as clinically depressed or mentally ill.

It is possible to refer yourself to a private psycho-

therapist, but I would generally advise people to see a doctor first. It is also possible to get therapy, individually or in groups, through the UK National Health Service, or through health insurance in other countries. You can be referred by a GP or a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist; the GP or 'family doctor' is usually the first port of call. Some GP surgeries have a counsellor on the staff who can deal with mild to moderate depressive illness.

In recent years, a lot of publicity has been given to CBT, or cognitive behaviour therapy (sometimes called emotional or rational-emotional behaviour therapy). This is therapy focused on the patient's habits of thinking and acting, given in a short course of sessions and issuing in changes of habit and action. It has been known to get significant results in a short time, and (possibly for that reason!) is becoming increasingly available from the NHS in the UK.

I want to emphasize again and again, at the risk of being boring, that no one need be ashamed of seeking help through the medical profession or through psychotherapy. People often are, sadly, because they think others will think them crazy or stupid. 'Mental illness' carries a social stigma that does not come with, say, going to the dentist with an impacted wisdom tooth. The only way to overcome that stigma, however, is for us 'crazies' to come out of our corner and be unashamed about our needs. Anyone ready to join me here on this platform? No? Take as long as you need...

A virtual lifeboat

There are, of course, many things you can do to promote your own emotional healing and to supplement any professional help you get. They include good diet, sleeping at regular times, regular exercise, giving yourself little treats (which needn't cost much), reading books or watching TV programmes that take you out of yourself, listening to music you love, getting a massage, spending time with friends, going to a church that supports rather than demoralizes you, avoiding situations that you know are going to be too much, saying 'No' to demands you can't meet, and many other activities that I need to remind myself of, just as much as you do! Often we unconsciously sabotage our health by failing to do these things, and we need to learn that we deserve self-care as much as anyone else.

For mild to moderate depression, over-the-counter herbal remedies such as St John's wort, valerian or herbal sleeping tablets can be helpful—but do remember that these are all chemical substances, and you should check their compatibility with any other medication you may be taking (including medications for physical symptoms). Moreover, they don't agree with everyone and, like all medications, can have side-effects.

One course of action I definitely do not recommend is trying to self-medicate with alcohol or 'street drugs'. The former is a depressant, the latter are illegal and often dangerous, and all are potentially addictive. If you are reading this and have a problem with alcohol or drugs, you can get help from your local branch of Alcoholics

Anonymous or a local drug treatment service, as soon as you recognize that you have a problem.

Something I've discovered more recently is the support that people 'in the same boat' can give each other. Over the past few years, I have belonged to the internet forum run by *Ship of Fools: the magazine of Christian unrest* (or, as I like to call it, 'Strip of Fools, the magazine of Christian undress'!). *Ship of Fools* has a large and thriving number of bulletin boards, including one that exists just to bring 'shipmates' together through common experiences, or in real-life 'shipmeets'.

One day I plucked up the courage to ask if anyone else on the Ship suffered from depression. I was overwhelmed with responses, and many said that they would feel more free to discuss their illness if they could do so on a private board, which could be set up under the umbrella of the Ship for a small fee. I recklessly volunteered to start it, and the result was *Waving, not Drowning*, a growing online community of over a hundred people who support, inform and challenge each other, as well as praying for each other and sometimes meeting face to face. I am the founding 'host' but, as I write, there are three others whom I have invited to manage and protect this vulnerable group of people. None of us are experts except in our own condition, but we are there to give encouragement, help and occasionally friendly advice to each other. I've been amazed how supportive a 'virtual community' can be. (Sometimes we even send each other real chocolate!)

Early in the board's life, one member suggested that as there were few understanding prayers about mental

health issues, we should write our own. The outcome was a collection of honest, insightful prayers and liturgy, and I have included a selection scattered among the Bible readings in this book. Some of the writers have chosen to be identified by their real names, some by pseudonyms, and some by initials.

I have also included a few of my own poems and some written by poets far more famous than I am. Later in the book, you will find my own story of life with depression, some reflections on faith and depression and, finally, the Resources section.

This, then, is a ‘book of bits’, as Spike Milligan put it (who himself suffered from mental illness). You can dip into it as you feel able, taking what helps and leaving the rest. I hope it will be a way of feeling less alone in your situation; maybe even people who aren’t suffering mental health problems will read it to understand their friends or relatives better.

The title *Crying for the Light* comes from Tennyson’s long poem ‘In Memoriam AHH’ (1850), grieving the death of a close friend. Here are the relevant verses.

*Behold; we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.*

*So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.*

If that seems like a cry of despair, consider this: those of us who are followers of Jesus believe that the light exists even when we cannot see it; that there are fatherly, motherly arms which will one day embrace the infants we are, and show that they have understood the language of our cry from the beginning.



Songs in the darkness: readings from the Psalms

‘Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart,’ says the writer of Proverbs (25:20). In the midst of depression, you may well have the same reaction to someone who advises you to read the Bible.

Maybe the Bible has been presented to you as a book of rules, of exhortations to do the right thing—not easy to take when you haven’t got the energy to get out of bed. Or maybe you have overdosed on scripture-based songs of praise, and you feel more like cursing than praising God.

When I was suffering a severe depression, with violent and terrifying compulsions, the most I could manage was to repeat Psalm 23 to myself from memory. Someone else’s ‘blessed thoughts’ would have driven me even deeper into darkness and helplessness.

So why a series of Bible readings on depression? Because the Bible is not just a book of ‘Thou shalt’ and ‘Thou shalt not’ but, among other things, a record of all kinds of human experience, including the most painful emotions a human being can suffer. Perhaps the most revealing, honest and accessible biblical picture of emotional pain is the book of poems we call the Psalms—so here are my thoughts on some of what I call ‘the depressive Psalms’.

Grief, sadness, guilt, envy and anger are emotions that those of us from an 'Anglo-Saxon' background may hesitate to reveal. The psalmists came from a more expressive culture and we will find passionate language in these worship-poems. That is why I have used Eugene H. Peterson's daring paraphrase *THE MESSAGE* (with my own paraphrases on Days 1 and 4). You may love or hate it: if the latter, feel free to look up a more traditional version.

I have written my comment as a diary, to get inside the experience of emotional pain. Depression does not follow a straightforward course from illness to health, so, rather than trying to fit the readings into some sort of progression, I have simply followed the biblical order of the Psalms. You will find that one day is more upbeat, and then it's followed by another 'down'—just as depression behaves in real life.

You don't need to follow these readings every day. You might want to select just one element from the mix of reading, comment and prayer exercises. You might read them in a different order, or skip any that seem too sad or too cheerful. However you use them, I hope that you will be able to recognize your own pain reflected in the Bible, and to recognize God at the heart of the pain.

———— Day 1 ————

Down and out

Focus: To focus your thoughts, sit comfortably and breathe deeply for a few moments. Repeat the words ‘God, God’ in time with your breathing. Accept any emotions that surface as a result. Then read the paraphrase of Psalm 6 below.

God, do you have to keep telling me off?
What are you punishing me for?
Please, oh please, be kinder to me,
I’m so weak and faint;
make it better, Lord—I can’t stop shaking.
It feels like my bones are all broken
and my soul’s a limp rag, terrified.
How long does this have to go on?

I don’t think I’ve ever been so exhausted.
I soak my bed with tears every night;
my eyes are so swollen
I can hardly see at all
because of this deep, deep sadness.

BASED ON PSALM 6:1–3, 6–7

‘Nobody told me that grief would feel so like fear,’ wrote C.S. Lewis in *A Grief Observed* (Faber, 1966). How I understand—the trembling, the tightening of the stomach, the paralysis, like a nightmare in which you

can't run away from your pursuer. Is it sadness at the past? Is it terror of the present? It makes little difference—even if it's a reaction to a long-ago pain, I still feel as bad as if it were happening now. Crying helps but I hate to do it in front of strangers, and sometimes I can't stop, and I end up swollen-eyed, exhausted. How long can I bear this?

I must have done something wrong, made God angry somehow. Has God lost patience with me? What is it Julian of Norwich says? 'I saw no wrath in God, but only in man.' Perhaps it's my own anger I feel... That phrase from Nehemiah keeps going round my mind: 'A God... slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love' (9:17). God, if you love me, cast out my fear. All I want to do is die; give me back the psalmist's craving for life:

*Look at me, God, and rescue me—
love me like they say you do!
What if I die? Then I'll only forget you;
I can't sing songs to you from the grave.*

BASED ON PSALM 6:4-5

The psalmist didn't believe in resurrection; I do. But I can't wait till heaven. Show me that eternal life starts now.

A poem-prayer

*Throw away thy rod
Throw away thy wrath
O my God
Take the gentle path.*

FROM 'DISCIPLINE', GEORGE HERBERT (1593-1633)

Suggestion

Memorize these lines of poetry or a phrase from Psalm 6, and repeat it to yourself during the day.

'This book is not a self-help book, a medical textbook or a complete guide to depression or mental illness. There are plenty of books already to do that. It is more of an attempt to tell one Christian's story, to hear the voices of others with similar experiences, and to discover whether the Bible can both echo our experiences and play a part in healing our wounds.'

'Crying for the Light' draws on Veronica Zundel's experiences—over nearly 35 years—of clinical depression. As well as sharing her own story, she explores the particular challenges faced by Christians going through such times. Turning to the Bible, she offers reflections on 28 relevant passages, interspersed with meditative prayers from members of Waving not Drowning, an online community set up by Veronica to provide mutual support, information and prayer for people with depression. A concluding resources section includes details of helpful organizations, web resources and books.

Veronica Zundel is an award-winning columnist and poet, established author and popular member of the 'New Daylight' contributor team since 1998. She is a member of the UK's only Mennonite church, where she preaches regularly. BRF has also published 'The Time of our Lives' (2007), a collection of Veronica's writings that reflects her deep love of the Bible.

'People often ask me what they can do to help a depressed person. It's been hard to give a helpful answer to that but from now on I will suggest buying a copy of Veronica's book.'

SUE ATKINSON, AUTHOR OF 'CLIMBING OUT OF DEPRESSION'



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