



Discovering  
treasure  
in life's scars

# TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF MENTAL HEALTH



## Written By

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# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

'Mental health' is probably spoken about more today than it has been during any period of history; national campaigns and steeply rising rates of mental illness have meant that it's rarely far from the headlines, and yet all too often we can find ourselves without a theological language for mental health and illness. The language of the mental health continuum can be a useful tool to tackle this; pictured below it allows to not only to see that mental illness does not necessarily mean someone is always suffering, but also that emotions such as anger, sadness and disappointment are a part of the continuum of mental health and God's design for humanity - not just a sign of mental illness. This is reflected in the person of Jesus, who experienced the full range of emotions; rejoicing with his friends and grieving at the death of his friend.



On the continuum, we see how a person experiencing the poorest mental health struggles to manage in everyday life; their relationships with other people and with God are disrupted and they experience significant disruption in their thoughts, physical symptoms, emotions and behaviour.

Conversely, a person with maximum mental health or mental wellbeing is flourishing in life, with healthy relationships with others and with God, is engaged in meaningful activity and expresses the full range of emotions in a healthy and functional way.

Mental illness is where a person experiences a described specified set of emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physical and social symptoms which are diagnosable by a professional. This also lies on a continuum, dependent on the severity of someone's experience.

# BIBLE AND MENTAL HEALTH

In scripture, we see a vision for wellbeing rooted in our relationship with God and one another; the Hebrew word Shalom is seen throughout the story of scripture, beginning in the garden of Eden and ending in the book of Revelation. To best understand this concept, and relate it to the Kintsugi Hope story, we are going to be using imagery around the idea of home. Kintsugi Hope provides safe and supportive spaces for people to explore their mental and emotional wellbeing. We know that home can be a difficult place for some – and isn't always the sanctuary it should be – but at its best home can and should function as the ultimate safe and supportive space.

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## SHALOM AND MENTAL WELLBEING

The Bible infers humans are created to live in 'shalom' – a concept that we believe includes mental wellbeing, wholeness and completeness as well as secondary concepts such as health, security, friendship, prosperity, justice, righteousness and salvation. This is the picture of life presented in the image of the garden of Eden in the Bible where Adam and Eve experience the fullness of God's presence and shalom; humanity and creation are completely connected and working together in harmony. However, Genesis 3 recounts that Eden does not stay whole, and Adam and Eve are exiled from perfect shalom, still clothed in his mercy but separated off from God and the fruit of shalom.



# EXILE

God's people, the Israelites, experienced exile again when they lost everything. The way scripture speaks of their experience; of being forgotten by God, far from home and grieving may echo what people experience during mental illness. The task for God's exiled people was how to connect with one another and with God whilst far from home - and this is our task today both with and on behalf of those struggling with their mental health.

God provided lament as a way for his people to continue connecting with him through their pain and sin. Lament holds together our honest brokenness and God's beauty. For example, Psalm 137 cries 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck' but it also encourages praise: 'Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them.' We believe that one of the tasks of a mental health friendly church is to be honest about our pain and suffering in God's presence.

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# STIGMA

One of the particular difficulties surrounding mental illness is that of stigma, where someone is reduced to their diagnosis without recognising that it is simply one part of their life. In Scripture this is demonstrated through stories such as that of "Blind Bartimeaus", healed by Jesus not just physically but through having his true name restored to him and being able to rejoin the wider community.

# WHAT ABOUT DEMONS?

Acknowledging the reality of life includes that, as Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6:12, 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' Mental health issues are no more likely to be as the direct result of principalities and powers as physical health issues are - but due to stigma we all too often jump to conclusions of demonic involvement where we would not consider it for a physical health condition. We must consider issues of mental illness and the demonic with gentleness, great discernment and care, and explore how we can help holistically. Assuming that those with mental illness are experiencing demonic oppression is not only stigmatising but can lead to further distress. For some, after a period of discernment and the involvement of church leaders, it is felt that more help is needed, and this must be done with a person's consent and in accordance with all safeguarding processes in place.



# REIMAGINING HOME WITH HOSPITALITY

Jesus' ministry on earth can be characterised as a step on our journey home towards God - one where he takes the first steps towards us. Jesus consistently demonstrated hospitality to those he encountered, speaking to those others avoided and asking people to follow him on his journey.

The Message Translation of John 1 paints a beautiful picture of Jesus' hospitality as it declares:

'The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.'

Through the incarnation, God models how we enter into one another's realities to offer hope and share shalom; Jesus did not merely enter into homes, he entered into transformative relationships from which people emerged forever changed.

Furthermore, Jesus' actions during the last week before his crucifixion did not ignore the pain that was around him and before him; but he held it together with his trust in the Father.

## HOPE OF HOME

In this final act of Jesus' earthly ministry, he consistently pointed not just to the hope in him, but the hope that was to come. He promises this in John 14: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe in Me as well. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?' Our hope therefore is not just because of Jesus' incarnation, but because of his resurrection and promise to return: yet even with this hope, there is room for honest story telling.

As Jesus journeys on the road to Emmaus he both hears Cleopas' trauma - and shares hope. This reflects one of the tasks for the church through pastoral care; that we are able to hear one another's stories and help one another make sense of them in the context of the biblical story. To this end, preaching ceases to be something separate to pastoral care - but an integral part of it.

The promise that Jesus leaves his disciples with is that they are not being left alone until he returns. Even as he leaves their sight, Matthew 28:20 sees him promise that 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' and we see that it is through the gift of the Spirit which facilitates Jesus' 'ever-presence'. There is no promise of an easy, trouble-free life - but the promise of a full life (John 10:10) and of being accompanied through life with the Spirit of God.



# FUTURE HOME

The reality of the Christian hope is more expansive and more beautiful than the polemics of heaven and hell. Our hope lies not only in the homecoming of Jesus, but the recreation of heaven and earth and the promise of Revelation that 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. ... There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' but also in seeing that our pain is never wasted.

This understanding must then be translated throughout our lives; from the welcome people receive in our churches, to the teaching they hear and the experience of pastoral care for those who are struggling, which seeks to embody shalom and be rooted in scripture.

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