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#118 Mental health: Am I failing God by taking medication?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Does taking anti-depressant medication mean I'm failing to trust God? I was told to read the Bible to cure my eating disorder - how do we educate the church? How do I reconcile the Biblical command 'do not be anxious' with chronic anxiety? Tom answers listener questions about mental health.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the show, where you get to ask the questions of New Testament historian, pastor and former Bishop of Durham Tom Wright and brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. I'm your host Justin Briley and this show is part of our wide range of offerings from Premier Unbelievable. Well today Tom is answering questions such as does taking antidepressant medication mean I'm failing to trust God.

I was told to read the Bible to cure my eating disorder, how do we educate the church and how can we reconcile the biblical command, do not be anxious with chronic anxiety. That's all coming up on today's show. Thanks to Renelle in Australia who wrote this review saying it's hard to sum up in words how much this show has helped me.

So I paid through the episodes instead. Thanks Tom for your words which always helped to colour God's story in a new light and ultimately helped me hold my questions, thoughts and processing before God knowing that it's all part of his beautiful story.

Thanks for making time to do this every week to be involved in the show's production your generosity of time and energy is so gratefully received.

That's from Renelle obviously an artist out in Australia. Thanks Renelle. Do leave a rating and review if you can it helps others to discover the show.

Before we leap in today I want to tell you about a new podcast from Premier Unbelievable. We launched it at our conferences last weekend and thank you everyone who came for a wonderful enlightening and challenging day. The new podcast is called Unapologetic.

So show where I sit down with a variety of leading voices in apologetics and theology to help Christians understand, defend and share their faith with confidence. The featured guest on the show at the moment as we begin is Glenn Scrivener making the case for how Christianity gave us our modern values and why it matters. Glenn was a keynote speaker at our conference so do go and check it out at premierunbelievable.com. While you're there you can sign up to receive a free ebook on the case for God and to ask a question here on the show.

For now here are today's questions. Well today we're continuing the conversation on well-being. Last time we were talking about how we developed good spiritual disciplines.

We were talking about the nature of addiction and how we reach out in love to those who do experience addiction and mental health issues. Today a number of questions and I think this is reflective of the way that modern life has increasingly brought to the surface I suppose. The mental health issues that exist partly I think because of the way culture is changing Tom, partly it may be just that we're better at diagnosing what we previously went unrealized in the past.

But lots of people asking questions around mental health, the use of medication, how that intersects with the way we should approach these from a spiritual perspective. So we'll start with two questions here. The asking very similar things, Ryan in Indianapolis and an anonymous listener in New Jersey.

Firstly Ryan's question, Tom and Justin I'm curious what your thoughts are on antidepressant medication. I've had social anxiety for most of my life and medication has been helpful in the past. But I always had this thought that maybe God would want me to rely on him alone to overcome my disorder.

I'm also in cognitive behavioral therapy which I believe will be the most effective step in treating my condition. But I want to take the medicine as well so that I can get back on my feet in the meantime. We'd love to hear both your thoughts.

Thanks for the awesome podcast. And again, I'll read the next one as well as it's similar. This person says I'm a 25 year old female who was diagnosed with bipolar five years ago.

I thought I was healed by God but symptoms continued to become more apparent at which point I surrendered to my Christian counselor to go on medication recently to stabilize my mood changes for the sake of myself and those around me. Does medication mean that I'm no longer fully reliant on God? Does taking medication mean I don't believe that God alone holds the power of healing? I find myself obsessing about these questions and condemning myself as a bad Christian any suggestion. So both of these questions are really around what's the place of medical intervention, you know, the kind of drugs that may help to stabilize someone's psychological condition and is that effectively not relying on God and relying on, you know, a bit of medicine? Right.

I mean, there's a well-known story, a rather silly story, which is used to answer this, and I've heard it in various contexts, of a guy who is lost at sea and is drowning and prays to God, please rescue me, please rescue me. And the boat comes by and says, can we help you? He says, no, I'm relying on God to rescue me. And then a helicopter comes by and chapshouts.

And can we can we fish you out? And no, no, God's going to rescue me. And so on and so on. And the answer is, you just prayed for something you prayed for rescue.

Maybe this boat is how God is answering your prayer. Or I've heard it as a Jewish joke, a guy who prays that he'll win the lottery and goes on badgering God, please let me win the lottery. And God eventually says, you could meet me halfway, you could at least buy a ticket.

In other words, excuse me, let's not be stupid about this. And it's very interesting that this question comes up often in terms of what we might loosely call mental illness or things like bipolar disorder. It doesn't come up when somebody has a broken leg or when they have some other basic physical ailment, at least in some extreme context, for instance, Christian scientist contexts, people would say, you know, if you've got cancer or if you've got bad eyesight or whatever, you just pray about it and you mustn't seek for help because that means a lack of faith.

And this all emerges from a basically deist model of who God is and how God might work in the world. Though it's just God and us and nothing else going on. But as soon as you say, God is the God of creation and God has put into his creation all kinds of plants and trees and so on, not just for food, but also for medicine and healing.

In fact, one of the lovely moments in Revelation 21 is when the trees, the tree of life by the river which flows out of the garden, out of the city, the tree bears fruit every month and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. There's something there which goes way back into the creation of theology of the Old Testament where God has put into his world the answers to so many of our dilemmas and it's the vocation of the medical profession over many, many centuries to tease out which herbs, which plants, which chemicals will help which particular ailments. And we don't normally, most Christians

don't normally worry about that when it's perfectly ordinary ailments, but when it's mental disease or mental ailments, people then think, "Oh, if I was a truly spiritual person, I wouldn't be going through this." And the answer again and again is, "No, it's all part of God's rich continuum." And there is no shame in asking for help.

When as a pastor, I have sometimes said to people, "Your particular problem is actually above my pay grade. I'm going to recommend you to a psychiatrist who will actually be able to help you." Sometimes they say, "Are you saying I need a shrink?" And I say, "No, look, as a pastor, I go and see a counselor regularly because that's how pastorally you are reinforced or directed. Much as I go to the dentist every six months, whether I think I need it or not, there are sometimes things which need checking up on.

And we are all in that continuum somewhere." So there is absolutely no shame there. And so, yes, taking the medicine helps, of course, if you can get to the point where you can come off the medicine and then find your own way forward, well, that's wonderful. Not everyone can do that.

Some people go through their lives having to take certain kinds of medication. And I think we must work away from that obsession, which this anonymous person from New Jersey says, and condemning ourselves as bad Christians. Of course, it may be that we do, all of us, have a lack of faith in certain respects, but needing medication is not a sign of being a bad Christian.

It's just a sign of being a human being in a broken world which we're waiting for God finally to heal. The next question very much comes on the heels of that. Medina in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin says, "What about mental disorders in general? As someone who has recovered from an eating disorder, I remember how hard it was for me to explain to someone at church, what is a mental illness? I was told to pray about it, to read and memorize passages from the Bible.

I tried that for 10 years and still couldn't recover until I started studying and using the traditional psychology methods and neuroscience. I recovered, but it breaks my heart to see someone who clearly needs a psychiatrist to be stigmatized as someone who just doesn't have a good relationship with God. Thanks in advance.

I appreciate every single one of the podcast episodes as well as all of your books, Tom. So yeah, it's a very similar sort of area here, but yeah, do you want to comment on Medina's sort of experience there and her view that we shouldn't be stigmatizing those who go down a psychological route when it comes to dealing with these kinds of issues? Yes, I think there are some Christians, some churches, some pastors who have seen a sort of over-psychologizing in Western culture as a whole as though post-fried, post-young, whatever was wrong with you, just go and talk to a shrink and it'll be sorted out. And that has sometimes offered itself almost as an alternative form of religion.

And so that then the churches have said, no, no, no, it's all about your relationship with God. And I want to say it really isn't an either-all. It is about your relationship with God, but the relationship with God is also about God wanting you to be a person in a community, a community which will include people who can heal, people who can help both at the informal level, somebody who just takes you out for a drink or a meal and chats to you in general, but at the more formal level where somebody with actually a medical or psychological qualification will actually be able to have a professional relationship with you and put their finger on something which really does need addressing either by medication or by certain lifestyle changes or whatever.

That's very often the key. Somebody will say, I notice that in your life you're regularly doing X and Y. Have you ever thought about just not doing that and doing A and B instead? And sometimes people have just never thought maybe I could change that bit and sometimes that's all that's required. Sometimes it's much longer term, sometimes it is medication and sometimes obviously psychiatric help.

So I totally agree. Somebody being stigmatized as somebody who doesn't have a good relationship with God, that is very cruel. It is possible that somebody's problems may have to do with the fact that they're careless about God, that they never say their prayers, that they don't read their Bibles in a sense of open and listening to God.

But often people are praying, people are attending church, people are receiving communion, people are reading the Bible and still the problem persists. So let's get the pastoral help, the psychiatric help, the medical help that we need and let's not worry about if only I was a better Christian than this wouldn't be happening because that's a dead end street. I suppose even in that case where we don't want to in any way deny the value of certain types of psychological help and therapy and so on, I think even in therapeutic circles and psychology it's been shown that simply the practice of prayer is itself greatly beneficial psychologically.

And I suppose Christian wouldn't say that's just a psychosomatic thing that he's actually because there is someone listening at the other end and there's something that happens in us when we do that. So I suppose the question is about how we kind of bring those two things together, the both and as you call it, Tom. And here's a question that sort of feeds into that, Todd, in Florida, who says how do we reconcile the command and promise of Philippians 4 versus 6 to 7 with something like chronic clinical anxiety? So are those who suffer from anxiety not praying the right way? Or is this part of God's word not true? So when something like Philippians, perhaps you're looking it up there just to get the precise wording, Tom, makes a particular claim or promise, perhaps you could read it for us.

How do we reconcile that with the fact that obviously some people still struggle with clinical anxiety and so on? Well, the short answer is that Paul knew perfectly well how

difficult it was to obey that command. I mean the command in Philippians 4 verse 6 is don't have any anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Messiah Jesus. But two chapters earlier, in chapter 2, he has talked about the fact that the Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to him with a gift of money and the fact that Epaphroditus had got sick while he was on the way and perhaps then with Paul.

And Paul says verse 27 of chapter 2, the same letter, he was sick near to death, then he says, "But God had mercy on him and not only on him but also on me lest I should have one sorrow on top of another." Now that tells you that already Paul has a great sorrow that he's in prison, he's being badly treated, etc, etc. And that Epaphroditus has come and has got sick and Paul has been really anxious because he desperately doesn't want Epaphroditus to die right there. And if that had happened that would be one sorrow on top of another for him.

So he doesn't say, "Yeah, he got sick but it was all right because I prayed for him and I trusted God and he got better and off he went." And then I couple that with 2 Corinthians chapter 1 where Paul says that when I was in Ephesus I don't want you not to know this, he says, "And that I was so crushed that I despaired of life itself. And you have to put Philippians 4 alongside Philippians 2 and 2 Corinthians 1 and indeed the whole of 2 Corinthians and hold it together. And I see Paul coming back and saying, "Have no anxiety about anything." Not as a sense of, "I have sailed through my life with an untroubled way because whatever happens I just trust God and it's all right." But that at every point Paul has had to have a massive struggle to get back to the Philippians chapter 4 verse 6 point and he's saying, "That's the goal at which we should constantly aim, however hard it is to get there." So I want again to say a both-and here.

And obviously some people do suffer from clinical anxiety where a kind of mental loop gets hold of them and then it drags them down into another worse one and into another worse one. And healthy people are usually able to say, "This is just a silly train of thought. I'm just going to listen to some nice music and go for a walk and it'll be all right." Unhealthy people often can't say that and they have to be helped to say that.

And discerning where one is on that continuum is a really important feature of Christian discipleship. Of course there may be a matter of learning how to pray in fresh ways and sometimes the prayer of silence or sometimes a repetitive prayer like the Jesus prayer, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God have mercy on me as sinner, to replace the downward spiral of anxiety with the ongoing upward spiral of praying that prayer round and round and round and letting it soak into all the anxious moments and images. There are ways of addressing this but it isn't just about learning to pray in the right way.

It may be something which again pastoral help, psychological help will be able to do the

business for. Well thank you so much. There's been a variety of different sort of ways in which we've gone at this over this episode in the last but I hope they've been helpful for all those who have been writing in and indeed all those listening who haven't written in but I'm sure equally a challenge by these kinds of issues.

We are living in what's often called a mental health crisis especially among a younger generation Tom and I think more than ever the church needs to be ready to understand how to present both a biblical but also a fully-orbed response that brings in the best of medicine and psychology and everything else but doesn't sort of try and separate it in somehow from some scripture but you know except that God is using all of these things to bring about wholeness in people but yeah thank you very much for being with us on today's show Tom. Thank you. Thank you so much for being with us.

Next time Tom's answering questions on the old testament where should a new Christian start if they want to get into the Old Testament and did events like Noah's Flood and Jonah and the Whale really happen. Why did God attempt to kill Moses in Exodus 4? A few brain scratches next week on the Old Testament as we begin the first of two shows looking at the Old and New Testament. You can find out about offers from our partners by the way SBCK and NT Right Online with today's show and to check out all our new resources from our newly launched Premier Unbelievable Ministry you can now go online there at premierunbelievable.com. For now God bless and see you next time.

(drum roll)