

“PSALM 77 THERAPY”

“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7).

I. OUR THOUGHTS

1. False extremes

This is a tendency to evaluate our personal qualities in extreme, black or white categories – shades of grey do not exist. This is sometimes called “all-or-nothing thinking.”

Life example: You make one mistake in cooking a meal and conclude you are a total disaster.

Spiritual example: You have a sinful thought in prayer and conclude that you are an apostate.

Biblical example: Despite most of his life being characterised by God’s blessing and prosperity, when Job passed through a time of suffering he decided he must be an enemy of God (Job 13:24; 33:10)

2. False generalisation

This happens when, after experiencing one unpleasant event, we conclude that the same thing will happen to us again and again.

Life example: If a young man’s feelings for a young woman are rebuffed, he concludes that this will always happen to him and that he will never marry any woman.

Spiritual example: When you try to witness to someone, you are mocked and you conclude that this will always happen to you and that you will never win a soul for Christ.

Biblical example: At a low point in his own life Jacob deduced that because Joseph was dead, and Simeon was captive in Egypt, that Benjamin would also be taken from him. (Gen. 42:36). “All these things are against me,” he generalised.

3. False filter

When depressed we tend to pick out the negative in every situation and think about it alone, to the exclusion of everything else. We filter out anything positive and so decide everything is negative.

Life example: You get 90% in an exam but all you can think about is the 10% you got wrong.

Spiritual example: You heard something in a sermon you did not like or agree with, and went home thinking and talking only about that part of the service.

Biblical example: Despite having just seen God’s mighty and miraculous intervention on Mt Carmel, Elijah filtered out all the positives and focussed only on the continued opposition of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19:10).

4. False transformation

Another aspect of depression is that we transform neutral or positive experiences into negative ones. Positive experiences are not ignored but are disqualified or turned into their opposite.

Life example: If someone compliments you, you conclude that they are just being hypocritical, or that they are trying to get something from you.

Spiritual example: When you receive a blessing from a verse or a sermon, you decide that it is just the devil trying to deceive you.

Biblical example: Jonah saw many Ninevites repent in response to his preaching. But, instead of rejoicing in this positive experience his mood slumped so low that he angrily asked God to take away his life (Jonah 4:3-4).

5. False mind-reading

We may think that we can tell what someone is thinking about us, that they hate us or view us as stupid. But such negative conclusions usually are not supported by the facts.

Life example: A friend may pass you without stopping to talk because, unknown to you, he is late for a meeting. But you conclude that he no longer likes you.

Spiritual example: Someone who used to talk to you at church now passes you with hardly a word, and so you decide that you have fallen out of her favour. But, unknown to you, the person's marriage is in deep trouble and they are too embarrassed to risk talking to anyone.

Biblical example: The Psalmist one day concluded that all men were liars, a judgment which on reflection he admitted to be over-hasty (Ps. 116:11).

6. False fortune-telling

This occurs when we feel so strongly that things will turn out badly, our feelings-based prediction becomes like an already-established fact. We expect catastrophe and the expectation itself produces hopelessness and helplessness.

Life example: You feel sure that you will always be depressed and that you will never be better again. This is despite the evidence that almost everybody eventually recovers.

Spiritual example: You are convinced that you will never be able to pray in public. Again this is despite the evidence that, though difficult at first, with practice almost everybody manages it.

Biblical Example: Anticipating the opposition that Jesus would face in Bethany, Thomas falsely predicted not only his own death there but also that of the Lord and the other disciples (John 11:16).

7. False lens

This is when we view our fears, errors, mistakes through a magnifying glass, and so deduce catastrophic consequences. Everything then is out of proportion.

Life example: When you make a mistake at work, you conclude, "I'm going to be sacked!"

Spiritual example: You focus on your sins from the distant past in a way that leads to continued feelings of guilt, self-condemnation, and fear of punishment.

Biblical example: When Peter sinfully denied the Lord, he not only wept bitterly but decided that as his mistake was so spiritually catastrophic, there was no alternative but to forget about preaching Christ and go back to catching fish (Jn. 21:3).

The other side of this is that while you maximize your faults with a magnifying glass, you also tend to look through the binoculars the wrong way when it comes to your assets, and so minimize them!

8. False feelings-based reasoning

In depression we tend to take our emotions as the truth. We let our feelings determine the facts.

Life example: You feel bad and therefore conclude that you are bad.

Spiritual example: You feel unforgiven and so therefore conclude you are unforgiven. You feel cut off from God and so conclude that you are cut off from God.

Biblical example: At one of his low points, David felt and so hastily concluded that he was cut off from God. "I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes" (Ps. 31:22).

9. False “shoulds”

Our lives may be dominated by “shoulds” or “oughts,” applied to ourselves or others. This heaps pressure on us and others to reach certain unattainable standards and causes frustration and resentment when we or others fail.

Life example: The busy mother who tries to keep as tidy and orderly a house as when there were no children is putting herself under undue pressure to reach unattainable standards.

Spiritual example: The conscientious Christian who feels that despite being responsible for meals and raising children, she ought also to be at every prayer meeting and service of worship, and also reading good books and feeling close to God.

Biblical example: Martha felt deep frustration that Mary was not fulfilling what she felt were her obligations and complained bitterly about it (Luke 10:40-42).

10. False responsibility

This is when we assume responsibility and blame ourselves for a negative outcome, even when there is no basis for this.

Life example: When your child does not get “A” grades you conclude that you are an awful mother. The reason may be instead that your child has a poor teacher or that the child does not have academic gifts.

Spiritual example: When your child turns against the Lord and turns his back on the church, you assume that, despite doing everything you humanly could to bring him up for the Lord, it is all your fault.

Biblical example: Moses felt responsible for the negative reactions of Israel to God’s providence and was so cast down about this that he prayed for death (Num. 11:14-15).

II. OUR “THERAPY”

A. Asaph examines his thoughts

<p>1. My life situation. <i>Time? Place? People? Events?</i></p>	The “life situation” is not defined in detail in Psalm 77. Asaph calls it “the day of my trouble” (v. 2), a deliberately general description which fits many life situations.
<p>2. My feelings <i>Sum up your mood in one word if you can. Are you sad, worried, guilty, angry, ashamed, irritated, scared, disappointed, humiliated, insecure, anxious, etc? You may want to rate the intensity of your feelings [%].</i></p>	<p>Troubled (v. 2,3,4) [100%] Inconsolable (v. 2) [90%] Overwhelmed (v. 3) [90%] Cut off from God (v. 7) [90%] Pessimistic (v. 7) [95%] Insecure (v. 2) [80%] Scared (v. 2) [75%]</p>
<p>3. My thoughts <i>What am I thinking of at this time? About myself? Others? The present? The future?</i></p>	<p>My past was all great but the present is all terrible (v. 5) God has cast me off (v. 7) The future is bleak and gloomy (v. 7) God’s promises no longer hold true (v. 8) God has forgotten how to be gracious (v. 9) God has shut up his mercies (v. 9)</p>
<p>4. My analysis <i>Identify false or unhelpful thinking patterns? False extremes, false generalisation, false filter, etc. (see chapter 3).</i></p>	The psalmist confesses to wrong and unhelpful thinking when he looks at his thought patterns and says, “This is my infirmity” (v.10). His “infirmity” or his distorted thinking includes: False extremes, false generalisation, false mind-reading (of God), false fortune-telling, false feeling-based reasoning (see chapter 3).
<p>5. My behaviour <i>Impact of 1-4 on me and my relations with others. Stopped helpful activities? Started unhelpful activities? Reduced activity? Hyper-activity?</i></p>	<p>Crying (v. 1) Complaining (v. 3) Cannot sleep (v. 4) Cannot speak to others (v. 4) Cannot pray to God (v. 4)</p>

B. Asaph challenges his thoughts

<p>6. My reasons <i>Why do I believe the thoughts I listed in (3) are true? What evidence is there to support my conclusion?</i></p>	<p>The Psalmist is not explicit but does imply: This is how I feel This is how things look to me.</p>
<p>7. My challenge <i>List evidence and reasons against the thoughts in (3). Think of what God would point to, to show you that your thoughts are not 100% true.</i></p>	<p>God’s has dealt with His dear people similarly before (v. 10) God’s powerful providence through the years (v. 11-20) God sometimes leads his people through deep waters (v. 19) God sometimes shepherds his people through the wilderness (v. 20) God will lead his people to the Promised Land (v. 20)</p>
<p>8. My conclusion <i>Come to a balanced conclusion, which will also be truthful and helpful</i></p>	<p>Although I feel cast off and forgotten by God, He is redeeming me and leading me through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Unlike God’s Word and works, my feelings are infirm - inaccurate and unreliable.</p>
<p>9. My new feelings <i>Copy some or all of the feelings from (2) and re-rate them.</i></p>	<p>Asaph is not explicit but from his words in verses 13-20 we may reasonably imply that Asaph now feels a degree of confidence, optimism, safety, and comfort. Troubled [30%] Inconsolable [20%] Overwhelmed [15%] Cut off from God [30%] Pessimistic [10%] Insecure [10%] Scared [20%]</p>
<p>10. My plan <i>How will I put the balanced conclusion into practice?</i></p>	<p>I will think more about God than myself. I will think more about God’s deeds in the past. I will believe God’s unchanging power and grace I will trust even when in the deep waters or in the wilderness.</p>