

PURSUING GOD INCARNATE: REFLECTIONS ON PROSPERITY, DEPRESSION AND JESUS'S HUMANITY

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In the midst of the death and destruction caused by World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned the following from a Nazi prison: “only the suffering God can help.”² One might assume that this sentiment, forged in the fires of deep suffering by a significant thinker, would ensure that pastors and theologians alike make room in their spirituality for God incarnate—in *all* of his humanity. But following decades of prosperity our world is a decidedly different place than the one that emerged out of the trenches of Europe in the mid-twentieth century. This is borne out in Philipp Rieff’s *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, where Rieff’s analysis of Freudian psychology led to his prediction of a decadent age where “a wider range of people will have ‘spiritual’ concerns and engage in ‘spiritual’ pursuits. There will be more singing and more listening. People will continue to genuflect and read the Bible...but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing.”³ Rieff’s work is prophetic for what is now the well-documented ‘health, wealth, and prosperity gospel’.⁴ Figures such as Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, and Paula White flood our airwaves with big smiles and even bigger pocketbooks. In *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen proclaims, “God wants us to constantly be increasing, to be rising to new heights. He wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity.”⁵ Such promises and the generally upbeat vibe of prosperity preachers speak powerfully to the hopes of North America’s middle class in its pursuit of good housing and greater career prospects. It would not be too much to say that if it was only the crucified Christ who was relatable for a mid-twentieth century German, it is only the resurrected

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² *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 361. In citing this phrase, I am not commenting upon nor supporting its controversial development by Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (1973).

³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 58-9.

⁴ See e.g. Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York: FaithWords, 2007), 5.

Christ that is palatable for many twenty-first century North Americans. The irony is that our society is now subsumed in a mental health crisis. An Osteenian gospel speaks to our hopes, but not to our reality. Specifically, our society is struggling with depression more than ever before. Some studies estimate that 20% of American adults have experienced clinical depression,⁶ and approximately 7% have suffered at least one ‘major’ depressive episode.⁷ Depression is the leading cause of disability for those aged 15–44.⁸ This is to say nothing of sub-clinical depression—a darkened mood, or even sustained sadness that does not qualify as depression. Without overlooking the seriousness of clinical depression, when I use the term ‘depression’ in what follows I am referring to both clinical and sub-clinical cases because both exhibit a melancholy mind that struggles to know and feel hope. Such a mind is of concern for ministry leaders and, in this paper, I wish to show how harmful prosperity thinking can be for the depressed broadly speaking. More importantly, I propose a way in which thoughtful leaders can re-articulate Christian spirituality to incorporate, rather than overlook—or worse—chastise, the deprivation and weakness experienced in one’s depression.

I.

Before I can fully articulate my hypothesis, however, one must appreciate that the trend of victorious spiritual formation described above has in smaller and subtler forms entered traditional circles. The ‘prosperity gospel’ is not a fringe phenomenon nor can it be dismissed as the gambit of an obviously wayward preacher. Even Dallas Willard’s award-winning *Renovation of the Heart* proclaims that “the hindrances to our putting off the old person and putting on the new one *can be removed or mastered...* No one need live in spiritual and personal defeat.”⁹ While Willard rejects the god of Mammon championed by Osteen, he remains committed to a vision of formation in which overcoming one’s weaknesses is the substance of Christian flourishing. This trend is also evident in Tony Campolo’s *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God* in which the author works through chapters like ‘How to Be Rich and Still Be a Christian’ and ‘How

6 “Depression in the United States—An Update.” Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/demystifying-psychiatry/201808/depression-in-the-united-states-update>. Accessed on Dec. 17, 2019.

7 “Major Depression.” National Institute of Mental Health. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>. Accessed on Dec. 17, 2019.

8 “Major Depression.” *Mental Health Awareness. Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/genomics/resources/diseases/mental.htm> Accessed on Dec. 17, 2019..

9 Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 10–11. Italics are the author’s.

to Care for People without Being Exploited'.¹⁰ Campolo admirably tries to avoid spiritual extremes but, in doing so, he is abundantly clear that being an 'embarrassment' is not one of the things that Jesus would want. One wonders how Campolo would treat Paul's admission of constant anxiety (2 Cor. 11.28) or Moses's reminder that Yahweh chose Israel not because they were "more numerous [i.e. impressive]" than other nations, but because they were the least of these (Deut. 7.7). A further area of illumination is the world of Christian radio, where the K-LOVE network—with over 440 stations in 47 states—has the motto "Positive, Encouraging, K-Love." It is not uncommon to hear its stations transition between songs with the tagline "All positive, *nothing negative*."¹¹ As Kate Bowler recognizes in her history of the prosperity gospel, this phenomenon is more than the praise of money. It shows itself in deep-seated antipathy to weakness, vulnerability, and 'negative' outlooks on life.¹²

To be fair, the difference between prosperity preachers and more traditional Christians is often quite clear. But even the very brief survey above raises the possibility that modern Christianity—and evangelicalism in particular—has failed to cast a vision for a truly alternative spirituality. Many evangelicals rightly talk about sanctification and formation, adopting guiding motifs like growth, change, and transformation.¹³ To them, Christian flourishing involves being (spiritually) strong—a conclusion that prosperity preachers also reach (with a few materialistic addendums). Of course, there is a deep biblical justification for the emphasis on strength (e.g. Jos. 1.9, Neh. 8.10, Phil. 4.13) and the need for transformation (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.1, Rom. 12.2). Yet sometimes the biblical record asserts what appears to be a more paradoxical reality. Paul can say "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12.10). Job receives a revelation only *while* he endures the loss of his children, finances, and health. These realities reach a climax when Jesus, God's definitive revelation, purchases salvation for the world on a Roman cross. Such a feat was impossible without the incarnation, where Jesus "made himself nothing" before being "exalted...to the highest place" (Phil. 2.7, 9). If even Jesus experienced the fullness of a human life (and not a particularly easy one); if he went hungry (e.g. Mk. 11.12), grew tired (e.g. Jn. 4.6), and finally died with a cry (e.g. Lk. 23.46), then it seems that much formation literature is at risk of committing a theological and pastoral disservice—especially to those with mental illness generally and depression specifically—by failing to incorporate deprivation into Christian discipleship. Such a failure is even more significant if we accept that Jesus,

¹⁰ Tony Campolo, *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God* (Dallas: Word Books, 1997).

¹¹ As heard by the author in January 2018 (italics, naturally, mine).

¹² Bowler, *Blessed*, 3-10.

¹³ See e.g. Philip E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013); Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

as both God *and* man, embodies the pinnacle of human flourishing. This would suggest that we require an incarnational re-figuring of what it means to be a more mature and spiritual human being.

There have been several recent attempts at such a re-figuring. Perhaps the most famous is the career of Henri Nouwen, particularly his book *The Wounded Healer*.¹⁴ Nouwen contends that, contrary to our impulses, a life of vulnerability enables growth in others. By showing solidarity with those who suffer, the pastor embodies Christ himself—not only in being a model for perseverance, but in showing care for the sufferer. Though profound, Nouwen’s work does not offer a significant engagement with the relevant biblical texts. Furthermore, he overlooks the precise problem that I have outlined so far: not only how one comforts a sufferer, but how one articulates the *goal* of spiritual formation if our God is one who works in and through weakness. A more recent example is Andy Crouch’s *Strong and Weak*.¹⁵ This work offers a multi-faceted take on the importance of weakness in our lives—how it cultivates certain virtues (i.e. humility, perseverance) and is thus a part of true flourishing. While Crouch’s book is valuable, it does not have a focus on depression and, once again, it possesses a relatively brief engagement with biblical texts. While there are other related books, especially those addressing depression from a clinical perspective, I do not rehearse them here because my focus is the distinct interface between exegesis and contemporary experiences of depression. Is there a place where these explicitly connect in Scripture? Is there a singular insight that could aid in creating an alternative spirituality to the prosperity gospel? If so, how might one articulate it?

In the following paper, I aim to answer these questions in the spirit of the early church regarding Jesus’s humanity: “what has not been assumed cannot be redeemed.”¹⁶ We are acclimatized to the general sentiment of a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses—presumably including our mental illness—but what we have missed is the evidence of Jesus’s *own* experience of depression and how this changes the way we think about ours. As an experimental test case, I offer Matthew 26:38, where I argue that Jesus experiences a brief depression that is signalled by the use of *περίλυπος*. This term is a derivative of *λύπη*, which—as we shall see—was one of the most feared emotions in the ancient world. I suggest that following *this* Jesus, rather than an overly spiritualized Christ, creates a vision for spiritual formation which helps the depressed to incorporate their chronic struggle into their discipleship instead of making it out to be an existential detour. To the contrary, depression can be a ground for becoming more like Christ precisely because our Lord experienced this darkness of

¹⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1979).

¹⁵ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016).

¹⁶ Gregory Nazianzus, *Ep. 101*, 32.

the human mind. This speaks to, among other things, the solidarity that God has with the depressed and the hope that we have of being raised, as Jesus was, to a new psychology. In all these things, I am simply making suggestions, many of which will not be conclusively proven. I only ask that the reader carry along, seeking to understand what I am saying and why it matters. Nevertheless, I do think—if I am given the time and space at some later date—that the recovery of the full humanity of Jesus that I am discussing here has the potential to move evangelical formation away from prosperity thinking and toward an incarnational model that can make more sense of Jesus and of ourselves.

II.

The narrative in the Garden of Gethsemane brims with symbolism. Adam and Eve fell in a primordial garden, and here the Lord takes refuge in another garden to consider a path that Adam and Eve could not choose. One garden is a place of disobedience and the desire to be as God, the other is a place of obedience where God incarnate chooses the cross. The difference could not be starker. While this typological connection alone is worthy of reflection, studies of the Gethsemane episode have also brought important insights on Jesus's betrayal, the location of the garden, and the nature of Jesus's prayers.¹⁷ I wish to discuss his weakness, a topic that is easily overlooked given Jesus's criticism of the disciples, who sleep rather than persist in prayer. "The spirit is willing," Jesus pointedly says, "but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26.41). What interpreters fail to see is that Jesus has just dealt with his own experience of weakness, which is indicated several verses earlier. He prays to the Father: "If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away...let your will be done" (v. 42). Here Jesus feels the weight of his impending death, arguably less to do with dying itself and more to do with the position the cross will give him in relation to his Father—being utterly forsaken. Yet the truly shocking line that flows from Jesus' angst is expressed a bit earlier with a tiny word that has explosive implications. In v. 38, Jesus says, "I am deeply pained [*περίλυπος*], even to death."

Although it would take a proper word study to truly explore the meaning and ramifications of Jesus's use of *περίλυπος*, I provide here some highlights that pertain broadly to *lup-* words.¹⁸ The term *λύπη* and its derivatives can refer to a variety of pains ranging from the physical effects of childbirth to the inward sorrow caused by a disobedient child (e.g. Gen. 3.16; Tob. 9.4). While classical usage focused on physical pains, its usage became increasingly psychological in the first century. An example from

¹⁷ See e.g. the overview of scholarship on Matthew 26 in Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 958ff.

¹⁸ For more discussion, though not pertaining directly to the Gethsemane account, see my Ph.D thesis: B.G. White, "Pain and Paradox: The Transformative Function of Strength in Weakness in 2 Corinthians," esp. pg. 33-55. Ph.D. Diss, Durham University, 2019.

Sirach is strikingly similar to the cry from Gethsemane: “Is it not a pain [λύπη] like that for death itself when a dear friend turns into an enemy?” (Sir. 37.2). In other words, a distinct use of λύπη relates to relational pain and heartbreak and, as such, it sometimes refers to the deepest possible pains. Sirach elsewhere says, ‘Remove pain [λύπη] far from you, for it has destroyed many, and no advantage ever comes from it’ (30.23). The apostle Paul likewise indicates how his heart breaks concerning the Jews’ rejection of his gospel: ‘I have great pain [λύπη] and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people’ (Rom. 9.2). In these examples, it is clear that λυπ- words can express relational strife, causing Jesus’s use of the term in the context of betrayal and forsakenness to seem quite natural.

What is most interesting about experiences of ‘pain’ in antiquity, however, is how problematic this emotion is taken to be. The Stoics believed that a wise person could avoid negative emotions and experience their positive counterparts, known as ‘good feelings’ (εὐπάθειαι). But there was no corresponding εὐπάθεια for λύπη in Stoic thought. Epictetus indicates that the wise man is never subject to ‘pain’ (λύπη), only the ‘fool’ (ἄφρων).¹⁹ Dio Chrysostom states, ‘What more abject creature is there than a man who is held in thrall to pain [ἄνδρὸς λυπουμένου]? What sight is there so shameful [αἰσχρὸς]?’ He goes on to suggest that an individual experiencing λύπη undergoes a ‘disturbance of mind’ that causes a ‘distorted body’ and ‘dejected posture’.²⁰ Stobaeus even asserts that λύπη causes one’s soul (ψυχή) to shrink.²¹ In short, an experience of λύπη was considered *irredeemable*. It ruins one’s reputation and sacrifices one’s soul on the altar of existential crisis. Although antiquity lacked a concept akin to the modern notion of depression, λύπη has been nominated as its closest possible equivalent.²² It envisions some of the darkened countenance, despair, and even the social stigma of what a modern person may call ‘depression’.

Of course, the question naturally arises: could the Son of God have experienced this depth of pain? We would not be the first to raise this question. In recognition of the terror associated with λύπη, Origen is concerned that Matthew the Evangelist gives too much ground to Arian doctrine in his description of Jesus’s pain—no one would expect a divine being to experience λύπη!²³ Notably, Origen does not argue for a revision of Matthew’s account, only that it can easily be twisted toward Arian ends. Origen’s concession is, nonetheless, illuminating because it shows—from the perspective of an ancient person—just how thoroughly the Matthean account wants to identify and describe Jesus’s *humanity*. In other words,

¹⁹ *Diss.* 222.6-7.

²⁰ *Or.* 16.1-2.

²¹ *Ecl.* 2.7.10b.

²² See e.g. William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 16-17.

²³ *PG* 13, cols. 1741-42.

Jesus really is experiencing a sorrow so deep and troublesome that it is at least plausible, for our purposes, to say that this is (in modern terminology) a serious depressive episode of some sort.

While there is much more that could be discussed, not least concerning the specific sort of ‘depression’ that Jesus experienced and the legitimacy of applying this modern term to the ancient Gospel account, the evidence marshalled thus far is sufficient to consider what all of this may mean, if indeed I am correct in saying Jesus’s humanity enables him to enter human depression. I want to focus on using my exegetical observations to outline an alternative spirituality to the prosperity gospel as it concerns the broad modern problem of depression. The implications of my analysis of Matthew 26:38 are possibly manifold and they cannot all be discussed here, but I offer at least four points of reflection which are detailed below.

1. JESUS SHOWS THAT DEPRESSION NEED NOT BE ACCOMPANIED
BY GUILT—IT CAN BE A NEUTRAL OR EVEN MORALLY
GOOD EXPERIENCE.

Although there may be occasions where depression can be attributed to the sufferer’s own willpower, even in such cases there are often extenuating factors such as environment, genetics, and various biochemical actions that lie outside of the sufferer’s control. The rhetoric of the prosperity gospel does little to recognize this; indeed, a life of gloom and depression is totally inconsistent with the prosperous life. ‘Believe and it will go away!’ While it is sometimes true that religious faith helps people weather depression, there is also evidence to the contrary.²⁴ In circles beyond the obvious prosperity preachers, individuals may still feel that their gloom is incompatible with their faith. This feeling can be compounded by peers or family members who shame or guilt them for their lack of joy. Such wounds can also be self-inflicted if the sufferer is overly scrupulous or unmindful of the doctrines of grace. The good news is that *even Jesus* encounters a form of depression and, because he is the perfect Son of God, one can only give (at worst) a neutral appraisal of his gloom. In fact, there are better arguments for saying his depression is morally good because—in keeping with the Hebraic tradition of lament—Jesus rightly perceives the horror of the cross and his negative emotion expresses the wrongness of death. Even if the modern depressed cannot claim this situation, they should at least be freed from the notion that their whole experience of depression is their fault. In the spiritual construction of life there will always be dark corners and alleyways for which one does not need to give account.

²⁴ See Raphael Bonelli et al., “Religious and Spiritual Factors in Depression: Review and Integration of the Research.” *Depression Research and Treatment* (Aug 12, 2015).

2. JESUS' DEPRESSION INVITES US TO SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR OUR LIVES.

After a survey of North America's 'officially optimistic' religious tendencies, Douglas John Hall's riveting *Lighten Our Darkness* concludes that prosperity thinking is destined for the crisis that occurs when our experience does not meet our expectations.²⁵ In other words, the path to spiritual maturity is setting expectations that can be reasonably met in one's life. If Jesus could not avoid dark mental places, we should expect nothing less as his followers. We are used to saying that we should 'take up our cross' and follow Jesus; now, in light of Matthew 26, we should be willing to take up our gloom and be conformed to Christ. This is not to say that one's depression is their cross *per se*, only that one should not constantly see faith as opposed to a dour state of mind. To be like Christ means, at times, to trudge through the darkness and feel the slow elapse of suffering. The expectation of future pain is an axe to the roots of pride and self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, my suggestion here is not all 'doom and gloom'. Like Jesus, we must understand that God often uses the darkness to reveal the light. We must set expectations for our lives that make room for the hope of the resurrection, but not before we have felt the sting of death—whether physical or existential.

3. JESUS DOES NOT MERELY SYMPATHIZE WITH THE DEPRESSED, HE SHOWS SOLIDARITY WITH THEM.

The fact of Jesus' depression—particularly its intensity and stigma in antiquity—does not merely change our expectations, it requires us—as hinted above—to re-frame the notion of being conformed to the image of Christ. Depression is not merely a neutralized sideshow in the Christian drama, it is a surprising way for believers to become bigger people, to share a bit more in Christ's sufferings (e.g. 1 Pt. 4.13). Jesus is not a distant high priest who issues executive orders behind his celestial desk. He is in the muck and mire of daily life, acquainted with the darkness. It is with the acknowledgement of Jesus' mental anguish that one can say with feeling, "Even though I walk through the valley of the deepest shadow, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me" (Ps. 23). We sometimes say that we participate in the life of God; we must learn to say that Jesus participated truly and deeply in my depression.

4. JESUS' RESURRECTION ANCHORS OUR HOPE FOR FREEDOM, NOT ONLY FROM 'SIN' BUT FROM OUR PRESENT PSYCHOLOGY.

There is much thought being given lately to the embodied nature of the new heavens and new earth, but what we might miss is the prospect of

²⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*, rev. ed. (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2011), 20-23.

having a new mind. If we are participating with Jesus, and he went from the grave to the right hand of God, then we also will go there. But to be told that we will eventually be co-heirs with Christ (e.g. Rom. 8.17) is also to be told that our depression—and every other mental disability—is redeemable. The resurrection of Jesus defies the psychological predilections of antiquity, the label of the fool, and it will continue to defy those same hard-hearted, guilt-ridden pronouncements today. The sobering truth is that much of our formation literature is written as though Jesus was never vulnerable, dead, or depressed. We must remember that we are united with Christ not only to share in ultimate redemption, we are to engage the wounds along the way: to share in his healing, to undo the trauma, and to look forward to knowing only the perfect love of God, which casts out all fear (1 Jn. 4.18).

I cannot pretend that these very brief reflections are the alternative spirituality to the prosperity gospel, let alone a spirituality at all. However, they are signposts for a different way of thinking about the *goal* of Christian spirituality. Lest all of my Jesus-talk sound like a basic call to be more like him—a rather unoriginal way to do spiritual formation—one must recall that when we say that we want to be ‘like Jesus’, we are often talking about ethics such as loving your neighbor, being merciful, and speaking the truth. It is rare, however, to imagine, as I have just done, that to be like Jesus is also to *embody the dynamics of power and weakness that run throughout his life* (e.g. 2 Cor. 12.7-10, 13.4; Phil. 2.6-11). Such dynamics are only possible because Jesus was fully human. Depression is not to be defined by what it is not, as though Christians make concessions for depression when our default mode should be joy. Instead, the suggestion here is that depression really is a ground for Christian flourishing, especially flourishing that looks anything like the incarnate Christ. In the New Testament, the goal of the Christian life is not fundamentally a *theosis*—that we might ‘become God’ as Athanasius said.²⁶ This doctrine is not specific enough. The goal is not to become like the unmoved mover, an implacable, divine being; rather, it is to be like “the Word [who] became flesh and dwelled among us” (Jn. 1.14). So we are to become like God, as Athanasius argued, but only in a Christological sense. Ben Blackwell rightly suggests that the New Testament teaching is not fundamentally *theosis*, but *Christosis*.²⁷ We are not simply climbing a divine ladder to heaven, we are also, like Christ, being thrust down to Hell.²⁸ Depression reminds us of our humanity, which is—in isolation—irredeemable. Yet by the power of the Spirit, we too have the divine power living in us, and it is for this reason that we can embrace depression as a friend, albeit an unwelcome one. Our depression is the Gethsemane moment in an unfolding drama that climaxes in resurrection. It cannot defeat us any more than it could have prevented Jesus’s resurrection.

²⁶ *De incarnatione* 54, 3.

²⁷ Ben Blackwell, *Christosis: Engaging Paul’s Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016).

²⁸ Martin Luther *WA* 18:633.

By way of conclusion, the remaining question—at least, the one I will consider—is how we encapsulate these incarnational reflections in our language of spiritual formation. I propose that we *recover a sense of 'otherness' in spiritual formation*. Many biblical motifs for formation, such as growth or transformation, can nonetheless be twisted to very un-Christian ends in a culture which values appearance and strength. A recovery of 'holiness' as a formational term might be helpful. Though it is often associated with moral goodness, its fundamental meaning is to be set apart or 'other'. Likewise, our goal in becoming like Christ is to become like someone the world has not since seen and will never see again until the *eschaton*. He is an unexpected God, who gathers the depressed to himself; indeed, who joins their ranks as he stares down the cross. By way of this solidarity, he brings us to our true victory, which is to draw closer to him in our sufferings—the “God who comforts the downcast” (2 Cor. 7.6).