

**The Bible and Mental Illness**  
I Samuel 16:14-23; Acts 16:16-34

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True story. From my church in Birmingham. I received a phone call from a Pelham policeman late one evening. He said that he was at a local motel with one of my church members and that the church member needed to talk with me.

I'll call him Dr. Steve, obviously not his real name. He went to Yale to undergraduate school and to Harvard Medical School. He was a quiet, studious man, about fifty-five years old. He seemed to have no friends in our church. He was extremely religious, meaning that his observance of the rules of faith bordered on fanatical. An example: his voicemail at his home was about a five-minute message about how to be saved. You listened through that entire message before you got the beep to leave your message. I also knew that he was estranged from his wife and children, which stuck me as a bit out of character.

Dr. Steve told me that night on the phone that he was at the motel because he was afraid to go home. "They are waiting for me in the bushes at my home, Pastor. I know they're there," he said, "and I'm afraid they intend to kill me." He went on to say that God had told him to run for President of the United States. He was instructed by God to run on an anti-homosexuality platform. Somehow that news had seeped out, he said, and his opponents were waiting to get him.

I told Dr. Steve to let me speak to the police officer again. I explained to the policeman that Dr. Steve had a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and apparently his medicine was out of balance. I suggested that they take him directly to the hospital, which they did. About six weeks later with the help of a caring medical staff, Dr. Steve had returned to his balanced self. He told me what I have heard from many people through the years. He said that he began to feel so well that he cut back on his medication and eventually quit taking it altogether. The hallucinations, delusions and anxiety gradually returned, culminating that evening at the motel.

I know that mental illness, hallucinations, delusions, and paranoid schizophrenia are not the words you are accustomed to hearing from the pulpit. You're more accustomed to hearing words like righteousness, justice, and sin. But these other words are important to a growing segment of our population and must not be banned from the pulpit and other public discourse. As progressive as our culture is and despite the advances we've made in this area specifically, mental illness is still greatly misunderstood. Today for my friend, Dr. Steve, and millions of others I want to take a frank look at the Bible and mental illness.

Some scholars speculate that King Saul in the Old Testament was mentally ill. Of course, the people of that day had no understanding of mental illness, so they attributed his tormented behavior to an "evil spirit," our text says. Their treatment was to have young David come and play his lyre. The melodious sound seemed to calm King Saul's evil spirit. But you may remember that later Saul tried to murder David. Then there is the child in our text from Acts. She is described as a "slave girl who had a spirit of divination." She followed Paul and his companions occasionally crying out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She did this for many days, Luke says, and it finally became very annoying to Paul. So one day Paul turned around and said to this slave girl with the spirit of divination, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And this is what the text says, "And it came out that very hour."

Now what are we to make of a story like this? To whom or what was Paul speaking? What was "it" that came out of this child? Many today speculate that this girl too may have been mentally ill. Today we have names for conditions like hers: paranoid schizophrenia, dissociative disorder, or perhaps delusional disorder. Of course, they had no understanding of these things then, so they called it by the names they understood: a spirit of divination or an evil spirit. Dr. William Willimon has written a helpful commentary on the book of Acts. This is what he says about this slave girl, "Here is a picture of enslavement—the grip of mental illness, schizophrenia, some 'demon' which holds the victim in bondage." (*Interpretation* p., 138)

If you are familiar with mental illness, you will likely agree with Dr. Willimon's word "enslavement." Dr. Steve was a brilliant medical doctor. Harvard medical school. But he couldn't practice medicine because of his mental illness. He too was a picture of enslavement.

So here we are in the year 2010 reading ancient texts about evil spirits and demons. Is the Bible useless when we talk about mental illness? Or can we find help these ancient texts? I think the Bible is helpful when dealing with mental illness, and I offer you these three ways.

First, the Bible can help us remove the stigma that is still associated with mental illness. A proper reading of the Bible acknowledges that it is not a medical school textbook. Its purpose was never to explain psychiatric disorders, and we must not try to force it to be what it is not. The Bible is a book of faith, a record of God's interaction with men and women. The people of the Bible were doing the best they could to understand what they experienced. When they saw these unusual personality occurrences, they explained them with the language they had available to them. Now, let me say this. It's important that we say that without condescending to them or to the Bible. That would be completely inappropriate because the Bible was never intended to be a psychology textbook. If we can honor that the Bible is a book of faith, that will allow us to banish old terminology and myths. It allows us to explain these unusual personality occurrences as mental illnesses that have a physical origin much like physical illnesses. It allows us to be a part of removing the stigma and empowering people to get the help they need.

Some of you remember the 2002 movie *A Brilliant Mind*. It was a masterful movie directed by Ron Howard. It won four Oscar Awards, including the Oscar for Best Movie. It was based on the true story of a brilliant mathematician named John Nash. Late in life he won a Nobel Prize for economics, but that was after struggling for decades with mental illness. As a young man, Nash had a meteoric rise in his profession, making mathematical discoveries that put him on the brink of international acclaim. The U.S. government recruited him to break hidden mathematical codes from the Soviet Union. He uncovered a terrifying conspiracy plot. He grew more and more paranoid. After giving a speech at Harvard University, Soviet spies captured and sedated him. They took him to a psychiatric hospital where they tried to extract information from him. After a long period of treatment, he realized that it was all in his mind: the U.S. government, the hidden codes, the Soviet Union, the spies. It was all an elaborate hallucination.

What this movie did was help people see how real this was for John Nash and how debilitating it was. Many say that that movie represented a major step forward in removing the stigma associated with mental illness. A proper reading of the Bible can do that too.

Here's a second way the Bible can help us deal with this issue of mental illness. The Bible is concerned with individual wholeness. Just look at the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was never concerned only with the spiritual side of people or only with the physical side or only the emotional side. Jesus was concerned with the whole person. So he helped people understand God and forgiveness and hope. He also fed the hungry and healed the sick and cast out those "evil spirits." He cared for the whole person.

The church too must care for the whole person. A study was done of people who sought help from their church for mental illness (*Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 2008). Thirty-two percent of those people were told that they didn't really have a mental illness. Their problem, they were told, was spiritual in nature. The study also found that people turned to their pastors first, not a psychologist. It's time for pastors and churches to quit saying that people with mental illness simply need to read their Bibles and pray more. It's time for us to quit saying that people need to stop taking their medicine and start depending more upon Jesus. We must quit being dismissive of mental illness and, like Jesus, show concern for the whole person.

And here's the last thing. It's a little harder to talk about. Mental illness is often tied up with sick religion. Often the two walk hand-in-hand. A man plucks out his eye because the Bible tells him he should. A girl cuts off her hand because that's what Jesus said. Someone cowers in fear because he has become obsessed with the book of Revelation and fears the coming of the great judgment. It was Dr. Wayne Oates, a maverick in this area, who wrote the book, *When Religion Gets Sick*. It's in our church library. He was not referring to global religion or religion in general. He was referring to the individual man or woman whose religious framework caused a major failure in the functioning of his or her life.

We must be champions of healthy, mature religion, which promotes freedom to think for yourself, individual responsibility, humility, self-reflection, service to others, and other such qualities.

Enslavement is a terrible thing. To have someone's potential trapped, held back, because of mental illness is a terrible thing. That is why on occasions I need to use these words that are unfamiliar in the pulpit. I want you to know that the Bible and your church can be your partners in finding freedom and wholeness.

### Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord, whose touch is gentle and empowering, come to each of us with what we need. Help us to find freedom and wholeness. Amen.