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## **The Lord Binds Up All Your Wounds:** *Addressing Self-Harm from the Psalms*

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In the reformed and evangelical world, very little has been written on the topic of self-harm, which is often referred to as “cutting” in common parlance. If secular research and statistics are correct, more than merely a dearth of literature exists. Moreover, in our churches, little is being done to help silent-sufferers of self-harm who may be more prevalent than we would care to think. Should the church be content with popular-level booklets lying around in a narthex display, available for the struggling teenage young woman to pick up if she is so motivated? Or, should our churches be better equipped at providing thoroughly Biblical counsel to those in our midst battling the temptation of intentionally damaging their bodies? This article will seek to provide genuine aids to those struggling with self-harm, or more precisely, counseling practitioners seeking to help those fighting such behavioral patterns. To begin, this article must define and document self-harm, its prevalence, and the multifactorial motives behind this behavior. In transitioning to the Biblical data, however, these questions must be answered: Does the Bible have any concept of these behaviors? And if so, does Scripture provide any spiritual solutions to self-harm? Finally, the Book of Psalms will be considered as a starting point in applying the balm of Scripture to the spiritual wounds of those dealing with self-harm. Ultimately, this article seeks to address how the Psalms speak to the particular challenge of self-harm.

### **Self-Harm Defined**

The terminology employed henceforth, will be that of “self-harm” and not “cutting”. The rationale for such a word choice is likely self-evident; however, as the contrast certainly points out, self-harm is a broader category than merely cutting. Self-harm speaks of many possible modalities for damaging oneself, such as biting, burning, scraping, harming with acid, preventing wounds from healing, pinching, banging one’s head, rubbing, and cutting.<sup>1</sup> Even this list of deliberate tissue damage is not exhaustive; thus, the category of self-harm is a helpful catchall for the type of behavior considered in this paper. Cutting is perhaps the most prevalent synonym applied to intentional bodily harm at the popular level, and therefore, it is likely to be the most well-known in our church communities. Pragmatically, while there is some sense to employing the popular designation, for obvious purposes of precision, the broader, more accurate designator of self-harm will be used throughout.

Although the label has been used considerably above, it will be helpful to explicitly define our terminology. Self-harm, or nonsuicidal self-injury, is defined as the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned,

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Latimer, Tanya Meade, and Alan Tennant, “Measuring Engagement in Deliberate Self-Harm Behaviours: Psychometric Evaluation of Six Scales,” *BMC Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (April 2013): 7.

including behaviors such as cutting, burning, self-bruising, or even breaking bones.<sup>2</sup> The International Society for the Study of Self-Injury's definition points us in a limiting direction when considering this topic. So, this article will not discuss suicide attempts, suicidal tendencies, or suicide itself. Instead, parasuicide, at most, is within the purview of the present study.

### *Suicidality & Parasuicide*

Researchers categorize the injury we are discussing as non-suicidal, to narrow the behavioral focus and deal with a more specific subset of struggles.<sup>3</sup> It is apparent that presently tackling all suicide attempts and harmful behavior would be overly broad and unwieldy to address. Therefore, we are limiting our discussion to non-suicidal self-injury. Such limitations, however, do not indicate that those self-harming behaviors are disconnected or unassociated with suicidality (those who are suicidally inclined/have suicidal thoughts and tendencies) or parasuicide (self-injury where no serious threat of suicide is possible, yet maybe a repeated part of suicidal persistence).<sup>4</sup> The distinction, then, between self-harm and suicide attempts is one of aim. Suicide involves the deliberate pursuit of death, whereas non-suicidal self-injury is non-lethal in nature.<sup>5</sup> Motivations behind nonsuicidal self-injury will be briefly considered below, but at this point, it will suffice to acknowledge that suicidality may be an underlying component of self-harm, though we are singularly considering harm to oneself that does not have the aim of death.

### *Prevalence & Risk*

While preliminary matters of defining terms and establishing the boundaries under consideration are still before us, the prevalence of self-harm and those particularly at risk for such behaviors should be delineated at present. It may be thought that self-harm is uncommon, perhaps due to personal experience with such behaviors, or lack thereof. If only a handful of strugglers with self-harm are known, then we may conclude that nonsuicidal self-injury is quite rare. Estimates, however, generally indicate that about 12-24% of adolescents and young adults have engaged in self-injury,<sup>6</sup> and 7% of adolescents and young adults report current and ongoing self-injury.<sup>7</sup> Such behaviors typically manifest themselves in adolescents of fourteen years of

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<sup>2</sup> International Society for the Study of Self-Injury, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://itriples.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michael D. Anestis and Edward A. Selby, "Grit and Perseverance in Suicidal Behavior and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury," *Death Studies* 39, no. 4 (April 2015): 216.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth E. Lloyd-Richardson et al., "Characteristics and Functions of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in a Community Sample of Adolescents," *Psychological Medicine* 37, no. 8 (August 2007): 1183–1192.

<sup>7</sup> ISSS, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://itriples.org/>.

age, on average.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, though studies are mixed, it appears that young women are most at risk for engaging in self-injury.<sup>9</sup>

If the above findings and statistics are congruent with reality, then nearly one-fourth of the teens and young adults in our churches have faced personal battles with self-harm, and perhaps as many as one out of every fourteen young people in our churches are currently struggling with these temptations. If we consider only females, the prevalence could be as high as nearly one out of every two teenage or young adult women in our congregations!<sup>10</sup> So far as these statistics are representative of the truth, the issue of self-harm cannot be overlooked, not even in the Christian community.

### **Self-Harm, A New Problem?**

Having established what is in consideration under the heading of self-harm, and having a general grasp of the prevalence of self-harm, one might ask whether such a study is relevant for today. Talk of “cutting” may have crossed the threshold of public discourse about a decade ago, and may no longer be in vogue as a counseling topic. Alternatively, self-injurious behaviors may be viewed as merely a modern and western phenomenon, and therefore passing from practice and soon to be passé.

Although some reports seem to suggest there has been a rise in self-harm in recent years,<sup>11</sup> a summary of the available studies indicates that nonsuicidal self-injury is statistically consistent in prevalence and across various nations.<sup>12</sup> These data would point to self-harm being an ongoing issue and not a hot-button topic of the last decade, soon to fade out of the consciousness of western counselors, pastors, parishioners, and therefore out of our churches, by and large. Additionally, since self-harm is not merely a western, or United States phenomenon, secular and scientific research is preliminarily concluding that such behaviors are here to stay, and must, in some sense, be part of our fallen human condition if it spans generations and cultures. If this final point is the case, would not self-harm be found in the Scriptures? It is to this point that we next turn our attention.

### **Self-Harm, A Biblical Category?**

Secular literature and scientific inquiry certainly have their place and have been useful thus far in the discussion in establishing the seriousness of the problem before us. But, do the Scriptures have a category for, or an awareness of, such behavior as self-harm, or is this, exclusively a

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<sup>8</sup> E. D. Klonsky, “Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in United States Adults: Prevalence, Sociodemographics, Topography and Functions,” *Psychological Medicine* 41, no. 9 (September 2011): 1981–1986.

<sup>9</sup> Colleen McClain Jacobson et al., “The Association of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Emotional Experiences with Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Young Adults,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2015): 401–413. And Stig Söderberg et al., “Childhood Sexual Abuse Predicts Poor Outcome Seven Years after Parasuicide,” *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 39, no. 11 (November 2004): 916–920.

Females have been found more susceptible to particular modalities of NSSI (cutting) as compared to the modalities more common in males (self-hitting, or fighting with the intention of sustaining injury). If all modalities are included, the differences between gender are significantly reduced.

<sup>10</sup> ISSS, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://itriples.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine McDonald, “Self-Mutilation in Adolescents,” *The Journal of School Nursing* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2006): 193–200. And Sandra Shapiro, “Addressing Self-Injury in the School Setting,” *The Journal of School Nursing: The Official Publication of the National Association of School Nurses* 24, no. 3 (June 2008): 124–30.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp et al., “International Prevalence of Adolescent Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Deliberate Self-Harm,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 6 (March 30, 2012): 10.

“secular” concept? While the following list is not exhaustive, it is representative of the Biblical data. We will consider the demoniac of Mark 5, the demon-tormented young person of Mark 9, and the various pagan practices involving self-harm (Leviticus 19 and 1 Kings 18).

### *The Demoniac*

In Mark 5:1-20 (cf. Luke 8:26-39), Jesus is described as confronting a man possessed by a legion of demons, who has been granted seemingly supernatural strength and the obvious tendency to harm himself. The text indicates that the self-injury was ongoing and consistent, and is explicitly described as “cutting himself with stones” (Mark 5:5 NKJV). Somewhat interestingly, such a mode of harming oneself is cited in various studies as a common practice of nonsuicidal self-injury.<sup>13</sup> Although the presence of demons in this passage complicates matters, revealing the complexity of motivation and causality, the Scriptures evidently display here a concept of nonsuicidal self-harm.

### *The Demon-Possessed Boy*

Secondly, another demon-possessed individual comes into contact with Jesus in Mark 9:14-29. In this instance, the one possessed is a boy of an uncertain age, who had been plagued by an injurious demon from childhood (Mark 9:21). The historical narrative begins with the information that the lad is “thrown down”, “gnashes his teeth”, and “becomes rigid” (Mark 9:18).<sup>14</sup> Yet the account of the son’s self-harming behaviors does not end there. Verse 22 of the passage indicates that the boy is thrown into fire and water; an action that would certainly appear to be self-injurious, to say the least.

### *Paganism*

Perhaps the clearest expression of intentional self-harm is found in the various descriptions of pagan behavior in the Bible. Leviticus 19:28 explicitly mentions making “cuttings in your flesh”. The passage goes on to specify that the practice was “for the dead”, almost certainly grounding self-harm in a pagan ritual or ancestry worship of some kind. Seeing as the majority of chapter 19 in Leviticus deals with the Israelites’ ceremonial separation from the surrounding pagan world, it would only follow that verse 28 is also such a separatistic command of holiness.

The other explicit reference to nonsuicidal self-injury in pagan worship practice is found in 1 Kings 18:28. The larger context is Elijah’s confrontation with the Baal prophets of 1 Kings 18:20-40. In verse 28, the Baal worshipers are growing increasingly incensed that their god is unable or unwilling to engulf an altar in fire, and so, they begin to “cut themselves ... with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them” (NKJV). The text leaves no question as to the nature of their self-harm, although the motives are not necessarily the same ones in the purview of our present study. More striking still, the text also states that such behavior “was their custom” (1 Kings 18:28 NKJV). While the Bible may be speaking about the custom of only these particular Baal prophets, it is altogether more likely that such was the custom of a number of pagan worshipers.

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<sup>13</sup> Shane Latimer, Tanya Meade, and Alan Tennant, “Measuring Engagement in Deliberate Self-Harm Behaviours: Psychometric Evaluation of Six Scales,” *BMC Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (April 2013): 1–11. International Society for the Study of Self-Injury, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://itriples.org/>, and Colleen M. Jacobson and Madelyn Gould, “The Epidemiology and Phenomenology of Non-Suicidal, Self-Injurious Behavior among Adolescents: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *Archives of Suicide Research: Official Journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research* 11, no. 2 (2007): 129–147.

<sup>14</sup> It may be significant to note that the Greek word which is translated “to become rigid” in this passage carries with it the notion of a damaged body, one that is withered up as though dry or undernourished. It seems as though the Greek text indicates that there is more to the boy’s self-harm than just becoming stiff; perhaps an intentional self-malnutrition.

### *Connections to the Image of God in Man?*

Having arrived at this point in our consideration of the Biblical data, perhaps the case could rest. To the question, “do the Scriptures have a category of self-harm within their pages?” the answer thus far is a resounding “Yes!” Nonetheless, further examples help round out the Bible’s perspective on self-injurious behavior.

In a recent and well-argued book, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*, author Nancy R. Pearcey connects hatred for one’s body with opposition to the image of God in man.<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:26 proclaims to the world that all persons are created in the image of God, and this creation of humanity involves enfleshed bodies.<sup>16</sup> The good and necessary consequence of such a Biblical anthropology, then, would mean that self-harm (among so many other practices in our fallen world) is oppositional to the *imago Dei*. Such a hermeneutic is furthered by a well-rounded interpretation of Romans 1:18, which states that ungodly, rebelling human beings “suppress the truth [of God] in unrighteousness”, part of which would certainly include the image of God inherent to the creational order of humanity.

Furthermore, in Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul is dealing with the marriage relationship, and how it is a living metaphor of the Gospel relationship of Christ and the church. In the midst of this discussion, in verse 29, Paul states that “no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church” (NKJV). While the context is unrelated to the present discussion, Paul is stating a universal truth to make a separate point. The universal truth is : every person loves and cares for his own body and does not hatefully harm it. Is this notion merely a recognition of normalcy, or, is the Apostle indicating that desire for self-harm must be alien to the (typical) human condition? While verse 29 is most likely addressing the natural course of the individual caring for his own body, more thought and exploration ought to be given to the ramifications of the Apostle Paul’s aphorism here. Fundamentally, however, it can be concluded the Bible recognizes acting hatefully toward one’s own body as contrary to the light of nature, in which category, self-harm would unquestionably fall (i.e., it is contrary to the natural order itself).

More could be said at this point about the Biblical data, especially on the topic of proper treatment of one’s body (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), but the question before us has been solidly answered. Scripture, both directly and indirectly, addresses the matter of self-injury and has an operating category of such behavior. It is also important to note that this brief and non-comprehensive exploration of the Bible on this topic has already begun to direct our attention to the various motivations that may be behind self-injurious actions. In the short survey above, supernatural influences, false beliefs, antitheses to the image of God in man, abnormalities or deviations from norms, ungodliness, and dishonoring God have already been cursorily observed. Never could this list be regarded as all-inclusive, but it does rightly raise the matter of multiple motivations behind self-harming practices. This theme deserves attention now.

### **Motives Behind Self-Harm**

From the above exploration of the Bible itself, multiple motivations behind self-harming behaviors have already begun to emerge, but it would be useful to determine some additional motivating factors behind the practice, if we are to explore ways the Bible speaks to these matters of the heart. To this end, secular studies can be useful when discussing “what is” — mere observation of reality. It is not shocking that depressive thoughts and emotions are associated

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018). 32-33, 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

with self-harm.<sup>17</sup> Studies indicate that those who have depressive symptoms are four times as likely to engage in self-injury than those who do not experience the same emotional symptoms.<sup>18</sup> What is surprising, perhaps, is the further complicating factor of difficulty expressing emotions to others, especially positive emotions.<sup>19</sup> Those who experience depressive emotions, but are able to express those emotions to others, have a much lower likelihood to engage in self-mutilation. Suicidal tendencies, suicidal-ideation, and suicidality are additionally strong correlate for those who practice self-harm.<sup>20</sup> As discussed above under the term “parasuicide”, in these cases, self-injury may be recurring and mounting attempts toward actual suicide. Thus, suicide may be an underlying motivational factor in those practicing self-harm.

The historical component of sexual assault is also strongly correlated with nonsuicidal self-injury.<sup>21</sup> Sexual abuse is a very serious and jarring experience, contributing to anxiety, depression, a poor view of oneself, and suicidal behaviors in those who have been made to endure such an experience or experiences.<sup>22</sup> Those who have undergone such a detrimental history, especially in childhood or as a young adult, were much more likely to resort to self-injurious behavior as a coping strategy or emotional release and expression.<sup>23</sup> Although sexual abuse in one’s history is not causally connected to self-harm, turning to self-harm as a form of relief or escape from past memories or emotions that still plague the sufferer may be taking place.

Picking up on the slightly noticeable theme of “communication,” which we are beginning to see manifested in secular theorizing about motivations in self-harm, some researchers believe the act of self-harm itself is an attempt at communication.<sup>24</sup> When adolescents and young adults struggle to communicate with those around them or to express emotions, impulsive self-injury may be a means of “crying out”.<sup>25</sup> This line of reasoning was corroborated by a personal interview conducted with a Christian young woman from the congregation in which I served.<sup>26</sup> “Sonya,” as she will be referred to in this paper, is a professing believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, has grown up in the church, having been raised in a godly home, and though she has personally been walking with the Lord for many years, has struggled with self-injurious behaviors since early adolescence. Sonya stated, besides emotional expressions of anger or depression or

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<sup>17</sup> Colleen McClain Jacobson et al., “The Association of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Emotional Experiences with Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Young Adults,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2015): 401–413.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobson et al., “The Epidemiology and Phenomenology of Non-Suicidal, Self-Injurious Behavior among Adolescents: A Critical Review of the Literature”, 409.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Resch, Peter Parzer, and Romuald Brunner, “Self-Mutilation and Suicidal Behaviour in Children and Adolescents: Prevalence and Psychosocial Correlates: Results of the BELLA Study,” *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 17 (December 2, 2008): 92–98.

<sup>21</sup> Stig Söderberg et al., “Childhood Sexual Abuse Predicts Poor Outcome Seven Years after Parasuicide,” *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 39, no. 11 (November 2004): 916–920.

<sup>22</sup> A. B. Silverman, H. Z. Reinherz, and R. M. Giaconia, “The Long-Term Sequelae of Child and Adolescent Abuse: A Longitudinal Community Study,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20, no. 8 (August 1996): 709–723.

<sup>23</sup> Söderberg et al., “Childhood Sexual Abuse”, 918.

<sup>24</sup> Mary T. Brady, “Cutting the Silence: Initial, Impulsive Self-Cutting in Adolescence,” *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 40, no. 3 (December 2014): 287–301..

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>26</sup> Sonya. A History of Self-Harm: An Interview, February 27, 2018.

depressive thoughts, that she would regularly employ self-harm as a means of crying out.<sup>27</sup> She saw nonsuicidal self-injury as a way to gain the attention of friends and family members and control over her ever-spiraling, out-of-control life, and as a means of manipulating those around her to her desired ends.<sup>28</sup> While this autobiographical interpretation of self-harm may complicate matters, adding to the myriad motivations behind this practice, Sonya's description serves to once again focus us upon self-harmers' desire to communicate. In her case, there was the desire for communicating her emotions and her need for caring and compassionate attention. Researchers have noted that motivations behind self-harm are typically along these lines of *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* communication.<sup>29</sup>

At the risk of belaboring the discussion of multifactorial motivations in self-harm and the points already made above, it should be noted that emotional escapism is also thought to play a significant role. In a 2004 study, Nock and Prinstein conclude that adolescents "often" engage in self-harm out of a desire to escape adverse emotions and emotional states.<sup>30</sup> Once again, the connection with emotions, emotional expression, and the desire to communicate one's emotions is before us. Of course, more time could be spent trotting out the motivations driving self-injury, but what has been examined thus far should be sufficient for the present purposes. At the least, it has been shown that self-harm carries an emotional purpose and a communicative purpose, and likely many times, those two motivations are aligned, or even one and the same. As a Biblical corrective approach is considered below, let us remember the self-injurer's desire to express themselves and to do so in a way that others might respond in empathy.

### **Counseling Self-Harm from the Psalms**

Having accomplished all of our preliminary considerations: defining self-harm, assessing its prevalence, establishing the multicultural and diachronic problem, demonstrating self-harm as a Biblical concept, and having arrived at a number of underlying motivations for self-harm, "treatment" of self-harm must be explored. While secular sources on the topic of treatment might be consulted, even if only as an overview of the available literature and the secular recommendations for providing care to strugglers, the aim here is to provide pastors, Biblical counselors, and Christian caregivers greater tools in accessing and using our God-given resources in the Scriptures when supporting those engaging in self-injury. Therefore, let us lay hold of the all-sufficient Scriptures themselves as we take up a therapeutic approach to self-harm.

Many passages in the Bible could be considered when dealing with God's image-bearers harming their God-given bodies. Some examples include inferences drawn from: 1 Timothy 4:8, the benefit of the physical care of oneself; Romans 12:1-2 and Romans 6:12-14, the need to use our bodies in reverent ways; 1 Corinthians 10:31, all physical activity must glorify God; Ephesians 2:10, as enfleshed-souls, we are God's workmanship created to do good; and 1 Corinthians 6:18, sin done in and with the body is more grievous and is against one's own body. However, there is an entire book of the Bible, given for emotional expression and crying out to the Lord for empathetic help and care. This book is none other than the Book of Psalms.

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<sup>27</sup> Sonya, 6 minutes.

<sup>28</sup> Sonya, 6 minutes 30 seconds.

<sup>29</sup> Colleen McClain Jacobson et al., "The Association of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Emotional Experiences with Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Young Adults," *Archives of Suicide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2015): 401-413.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew K. Nock and Mitchell J. Prinstein, "A Functional Approach to the Assessment of Self-Mutilative Behavior," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 5 (October 2004): 885-890.

### *The Purpose of the Psalms*

Individual verses and citations from the Book of Psalms could be brought forth as proof-text responses to self-harm, but a more holistic approach to the Psalter must be sought. This is because the Psalms have been given by God as praise; man's expression back to God. Along these very lines, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, once asked of the book of Psalms: How did these words which men sang to God come to be regarded as words from God to man?<sup>31</sup> In other words, why are the Psalms studied like every other book of the Bible, when they have been given as expressions of our heart back to our Creator and Redeemer? It has been pointed out that we rightly read sixty-five of the Bible's sixty-six books as God speaking to us, but the Book of Psalms alone is composed of collections of songs from men to God.<sup>32</sup> This fact, of course, does not mean that the Psalms are uninspired words. Instead, it simply means that the Psalter is uniquely designed as expressions of our words to God.<sup>33</sup> As such, we will presently seek to employ these Psalms as God originally intended it: self-expression unto him.

Such a concept can also be seen from the inscriptions, or headings, of the Psalms themselves. These "inscriptions" or "headings" are not the English editors' summary additions before the Biblical passages, like for instance "The Way of the Righteous and the End of the Ungodly", Psalm 1 NKJV. Instead, these inscriptions or headings are in the actual inspired Biblical text itself where the compiler's authoritatively added headings immediately precede the poems themselves such as "A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom, his son", (Psalm 3:1 NKJV). These inscriptions throughout the Book of Psalms indicate the intended use of the Psalter: worship. Many of these Psalm headings, fifty-four to be exact, instruct the reader that these songs are to be used in praise and worship of God (see the phrase "To the Chief Musician"). Other inscriptions specify that these songs were "praise," or "songs" to God, or should be sung to a particular tune (e.g., Psalm 22:1), and even the meaning of the word "Psalm" itself is a holy song. All of these facts point us to the necessary conclusion that we are to use the Psalms as an expression of ourselves to God. This point is significant because it reorients our entire approach to the Psalter.

### *Emotional expression in the Psalms*

Everyone loves a good song. Songs do something to us. They move us, they evoke emotions, they allow us to express our own hearts, in music and in verse. This influence is true of the songs of the Bible as well. Not only are they given by inspiration (1 Timothy 3:16), they are given as emotional outlets of our soul (e.g. Psalm 4:7; 5:1-2, 11; 144:9, 15; 145:1, 21, as a random sampling from beginning to end of the Psalter shows). John Calvin, commenting on the Psalms as a whole goes so far as to say that they are an entire "anatomy of all the parts of the soul" because he says:

... there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.<sup>34</sup>

John Calvin assuredly was not the only, and by no means, the first, to point out such an understanding of the Book of Psalms. As early as the 300s, Athanasius of Alexandria recognized

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<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Lefebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms*, revised edition (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011), 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1974), IV, xxxvii.



that the Psalms are used in a special way in the life of the believer when he said, the Psalter “has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul.”<sup>35</sup>

We do not have to take the word of commentators to know the multiplicity of emotions and experiences which the Psalms express; all we have to do is pick up the Book for ourselves to see its rich diversity and depth. There are Psalms of sorrow and suffering, anguish and fear, grief and opposition, joys and delights. Psalms are full of honest confessions, straightforward doubts, impoverished laments, and strong curses. In the Psalter, we take upon our lips divinely inspired words of contrition, confession, and repentance. We speak of enraptured jubilation at our God and His salvation to us, we rejoice in his mercies and grace, and we cry out in thanksgiving as well as heartache. A cursory reading of the 150 Psalms should be enough to produce agreement with Calvin and Athanasius’ perspective of the Psalter; that in this divinely given book, humanity can fully express the breadth and depth of the human heart and experience.

After all of this effort to radically reorient our understanding of the Psalter, it may be wondered: what do any of the observations have to do with counseling those engaging in self-harm? One would only have to think back to the motivations behind self-harm to see how the Psalter can be the beginnings of a solution. Many engaging in acts of self-mutilation point out either the inability to express emotions or the desire for emotional expression. If the Psalms have been given by God as mankind’s rightful offering of our passions and feelings unto God, could the counselee not benefit from such a gift? The value of God’s word is infinite and exhaustive, and the Psalms are the indispensable portion of God’s word that we are to take up as the full expression of our human condition. The groanings, anguish, and sin-struggles present in the Psalter, are not the distant moans of the psalmists. As we use the Psalter for its God-intended purpose, the groanings become our groanings, the anguish our anguish, and the sin-struggles our personal battle with our sins.

As an aside, the above discussion could perhaps be responded to by saying the Psalms *may have* at one time been given for singing to the Old Testament saints, but surely such a notion of singing the Psalms does not continue today. To this response, a simple reading of two New Testament passages is all that would be necessary by way of action. Paul in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 commands the ongoing singing of Psalms. In both instances, Psalms are explicitly mentioned, as is the command of *singing*. Therefore, the New Testament at least expects the ongoing use of the Psalms as melodic and musical expressions of our hearts to God.

For the counselee to apprehend this incredible resource in expressing the fullbreadth of emotions through the Psalter, a large victory will have been won in removing one of the motivational pillars of self-harm. For a self-injuring individual to seek better emotional expressions than damaging their body, will be on far firmer ground than if they are left without the Psalter. Let us have our struggling congregants take up the inspired songbook and pour out their souls to the God who perfectly knows our sorrows (Isaiah 53:3), sympathizes with our experience in every way (Hebrews 4:15), and has perfectly composed the Psalms as an inspired expression of the souls he himself created.

### *The Psalms as “Medicine”*

Modern songs are used as an expressive medium, as touched upon above. And the Psalms are an appropriate expression of our hearts, as has been established. But the Psalms do more and are more than *mere* expressions. The Psalms shape us. Psalm 119:105 is a verse that demonstrates this point: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (NKJV). The Bible, perhaps

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<sup>35</sup> “The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms,” accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>.

most specifically in the mind of the psalmist here, the *Psalms* lead and guide us on the right path. Additionally, 1 Timothy 3:16 reveals that *all* of Scripture has this life-transforming and God-conforming purpose. The Psalms as praise, song, and emotional expression fall under the Apostle Paul's treatment in that verse. For in that verse, the Apostle assuredly had the whole Old Testament in his mind when he penned those words to Timothy. After all, the New Testament had not been written, or at minimum, not fully written yet.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 350) specifically sees the Book of Psalms as the portion of the Bible that sanctifies us, that conforms us to the good and the beautiful that God designed us to be.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the Psalter is ordered and structured in such a way as to lead us on the path of sanctification, to conform us more to the mind of Christ. Gregory, along with other Early Church Fathers of his time, saw the Psalter not as a textbook on spiritual medicine, but as spiritual medicine itself!<sup>37</sup> It should not be too hard to examine the Psalms to see how they accomplish this purpose as well.

The typical flow of each Biblical song is to lead the reader and singer from a perspective of self, a view of pain and suffering, to that of heavenward thoughts. The Psalms orient our minds in the proper direction. Take, for instance, the great Psalm of doubt and wrestling with unbelief: Psalm 73. Here Asaph is deeply shaken and thinking in the depths of his struggle (verse 2). He confesses his sinful and erroneous thinking as he examines the plight of the righteous compared with the plight of the wicked (verse 3-14). Asaph even knows that such a perspective is harmful to himself and his fellow people of God (verse 15-16). The Psalm does not leave the singer in the slough of despond, however, and begins to lead us up from a perspective of doubt and misery. Asaph remembers the ultimate end of the righteous and the wicked (verse 17-20). In apprehending this truth, the Psalmist continues on his corrective path, recognizing that he was foolish to think the way he did, and that, even in his doubts and disbelief, God was holding and guiding him, not allowing him to stumble irreparably (verse 21-26). The Psalm, having walked the reader who is struggling deeply with a wavering faith through despair, and onto a firm foundation, the Psalm ends with eruptive faith and confidence in God (verse 25-28).

One further example should serve to adequately establish this point of the Psalms conforming us to the pattern and design of God. Psalm 51 is the renowned Psalm of repentance after David committed adultery with Bathsheba. While the story itself may not resonate with the modern reader or singer of this Psalm, it is important to note that it exemplifies the universal experience of guilt and shame over sin and the desperate need for cleansing. The psalmist begins by requesting mercy according to God's covenant faithfulness, to purify and cleanse him from sin out of God's gracious provision alone (verse 1-2). The Psalm does not claim a right to such forgiveness or innocency, but fully owns the sin committed against God (verse 3-4). If our sin were not enough to separate us from God and deserve condemnation, we next confess our sin nature itself — we sin, but we are also sinners (verse 5-6).<sup>38</sup> The request for cleansing continues, but in a slightly different vein than before. Now we are acknowledging that there is no provided sacrifice for our sin. There is no simple offering able to be made that expiation could be accomplished. Instead, the depth of our sin is deserving of death, separation from God, rejection by the Holy Spirit, and a joyless life (verse 7-12). But, oh, that God would forgive sin! The reason given is interesting: that we may be able to teach others, see unbelievers converted, that we might be free from having the blood of others on our hands for not warning, and that we might

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<sup>36</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Casimir McCambley, *Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 208.

show others the rightful praise of God (verse 13-15).<sup>39</sup> The Psalm does not permit us to ask selfishly for forgiveness, sake, but to be useful to the kingdom of Christ once again! That is, after all, where the Psalm concludes (verse 18-19) — in God forgiving us and restoring us, that the people of God would be built up, and the sin of the individual will not be brought to bear on the larger assembly.

Can it not be seen how the typical pattern of the Psalms<sup>40</sup> leads us through the difficulties of life, and reorient our perspectives in a Godward direction? Surely, there are Psalms that are entirely “upward” in their direction (e.g., Psalm 150), but those that express the depths of the human heart, shape us as they are communicated back to God. These Biblical songs are far superior to secular or even other sacred songs, for they are inspired words of truth, given for the purpose of conforming us more to the pattern and mind of Christ (cf. Colossians 3:16 with Romans 12:1-2).

### *Jesus in the Psalms*

Up until this point in seeking counsel for self-harm from the Psalms, though we have addressed one of the underlying motivators behind such behavior, we have not yet begun to see the direct benefit the Psalms can have when counseling self-injurers. In order to “access” such Scriptural insight and medicine, we must consider how Jesus understood and used the Psalms. On two separate occasions after the resurrection, Jesus expounded the Old Testament Scriptures as speaking of himself. In two different places in chapter 24 of in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus explains how He fulfilled Moses, the Prophets, *and the Psalms*. He states in verse 44 that all of these contained prophecies He needed to fulfill. But verse 27, though not explicitly referring to “the Psalms” in that verse, does state that “all the Scriptures” speak concerning Him. Taking these two clear examples with John 5:39 produces an understanding of the Psalms wherein we must seek to find Jesus. John 5:39 is Jesus’ recorded words speaking to the Jewish leaders, and He says that the Old Testament Scriptures<sup>41</sup> speak of Him. All of the Scriptures, the Psalms included, communicate the person and work of Christ to us. Finally, along these lines, coupling the above verses with Colossians 3:16, as mentioned above, rounds out our understanding of seeing Christ in the Psalms. Paul, in that verse, explicitly says that the Psalms are the words of Christ. So far as we let the Psalms dwell in us, we are letting the words of Christ dwell in us. Therefore, it is Biblically safe to say that the Psalms reveal to us Christ himself; and as we express these words back to God, we are expressing our union with our Savior. Taking the above with the 82 New Testament quotations of the Psalms, it is obvious that the Apostolic authors saw the Psalms as proclaiming and expounding Christ.<sup>42</sup>

How does such an interpretation once again radically reorient our understanding and use of the Psalms, particularly when seeking to leverage them in the case of counseling self-harm? Not only does our use of sacred songs enable us to express the depths of our emotions to God, but doing so is also an identification with Christ. As we sing the words He Himself sang (cf. Matthew 26:30 & Matthew 27:46), perhaps more deeply than otherwise is possible, we are expressing our union and communion with Christ Jesus. Such an understanding transforms our appreciation for what we read and what we sing.

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<sup>39</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Canticles and Selected Psalms* (London:Hodder & Stoughton, 1966).

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 88 would be the lone exception of this upward trajectory.

<sup>41</sup> I write “the Old Testament”, because the New had yet to be written when Jesus spoke these words. Therefore, most immediately, He meant the Old, though of course His statement extends to the New.

<sup>42</sup> Dennis Prutow, *Public Worship 101: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Worship, the Elements of Worship, Exclusive Psalmody, and A Cappella Psalmody*, 1st edition (Pittsburgh, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2013), 277.

Take, for instance, Psalm 1. The one tempted with self-harm might read of striving to be a solitary righteous person surrounded by temptation, and there might be an encouragement and spiritual blessing that is produced from such a reading. If instead, the one tempted with self-harm understands the lone righteous one who successfully withstood all temptation when surrounded on every side by the ungodly (Psalm 1:1), who only ever delighted himself in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:2), who is described as a tree of life (Psalm 1:3) elsewhere in Scripture (Revelation 2:7, 22:1-5, with Revelation 7:14), the one who judges the wicked and the hypocrite (Psalm 1:4-5), and who knows our path (Psalm 1:6), is none other than Christ himself.<sup>43</sup> For the self-injurer to sing of their temptation toward wickedness, to harm themselves like the way of the pagan or the demoniac, and yet to sing of their union with Christ their righteousness, provides not only emotional outlet and conformity to the pattern of Scripture, if also preaches to their heart of their standing in Jesus' perfection and success! Herein is great hope and comfort.

Seeing Christ in the Psalter in this way is not finding Jesus under every rock of the Old Testament,<sup>44</sup> but taking Christ at his own words, and seeing that the Psalms speak of him. Therefore, we see him as the Righteous man of Psalm 1; the Suffering Servant of Psalm 3;<sup>45</sup> the enfleshed-one of Psalm 8;<sup>46</sup> the resurrected one of Psalm 16;<sup>47</sup> he is the faithful shepherd who leads us in the dark valleys of life (Psalm 23); He is the victorious and ascended one of Psalm 24; He is the sufficient atonement of Psalm 51; He is the one tempted in the Judean wilderness of Psalm 63;<sup>48</sup> He is the king who conquers his enemies with finality in Psalm 83;<sup>49</sup> He is the word became flesh in Psalm 119; He is the one who brings many sons to glory in Psalms 146-150.

If we counsel those struggling with the temptation to self-harm by using the Psalter in such a Christocentric way, we will lead them ever-onward to greater union and fellowship with their Savior. However, such a hermeneutic raises the most significant insight into the therapeutic treatment of self-harm though. That is, we identify with Christ and *His* sufferings, while He at the same time, is empathetically identifying with us and *our* sufferings. Recall above that we concluded the self-injurer is seeking to communicate to others, crying out for help, empathy, and even attention. If those engaging in self-harm can be directed to cry-out their anguish to Christ, through the emotional expressions of the Psalms, you will immediately find empathy and fellowship *with* and *from* Christ.

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Henry Reardon., *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000), xiv-xv, 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> There is a helpful Charles Spurgeon quote along these very lines: "I love to find Jesus everywhere -- not by twisting the Psalms and other scriptures to make them speak of Christ when they do nothing of the kind, but by seeing him where he truly is. I would not err as Cocceius did, of whom they said his greatest fault was that he found Christ everywhere, but I would far rather err in his direction and not have it said of me, as of another divine of the same period, that I found Christ nowhere! Would it not be better to see him where he is not, than to miss him where he is?" Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons on Jesus and the Holy Spirit* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 105.

<sup>45</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, xvi.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. This notion of Christ's incarnation, God taking on human flesh, is significant for the self-injurer. Christ successfully navigates a godly use of his flesh.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 29-30. Like the above note regarding the incarnation, the resurrection is an important doctrine when it comes to perfected flesh and the teleological use of our bodies. Christ is not raised as a disembodied spirit, but in the flesh.

<sup>48</sup>John Gill's Exposition of the Bible, Bible Study Tools, accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/psalms-63-introduction.html>. Gill draws parallels with Christ's temptation in the Judean wilderness and the inscription of David's Psalm when he too was starving in the Judean wilderness.

<sup>49</sup>Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 167-168.

*Sympathetic Suffering in the Psalms*

Perhaps the present point can best be made through the illustration of this hermeneutic. In Psalm 22, no careful exegete of Scripture can deny the Christological nature of the Psalm. Christ himself undeniably indicates that this Psalm is fulfilled in His crucifixion (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46) as do the New Testament authors (cf. Mark 15:22, 29; Hebrews 2:12), and the imagery is unquestionably that of crucifixion (Psalm 22:14, 16, 17). If the Christian self-injurer desires to engage in harming behaviors, to experience pain, feel the depths of their emotions expressed physically, or to express what they are struggling to communicate otherwise, might they commune with their suffering Savior through His first-person account of His anguish?

Verse 1-2: God, I am all alone, even You have abandoned me, You have turned a deaf ear to me.

Verse 3-5: You have been faithful to the godly in the past, will You be faithful to me like You were to them?

Verse 6-8: I have no friends, everyone hates me, and they mock my faith as though it is worthless.

Verse 9-11: But I am one of your covenant people, I have been your child from my earliest memories. Why are You not helping me now?

Verse 12-15: The pain and shame I feel is immense, I do not believe I can continue on like this at all.

Verse 16-18: Christ has taken my wounds. He has been pierced for me, lacerated for me, he has bled so that I do not have to. His body took the punishment I want to inflict upon myself right now. No more blood needs to be shed.

Verse 19-21: Please deliver me from this terrible temptation quickly. You count my life and my body precious in Your sight, so save me from this terrible nightmare.

Then verse 21 ends with the phrase “You have answered me” (NKJV), and the remainder of the Psalm is nothing but praise and victory and blessing.

If the self-harmer experientially embraces the sufferings of Christ in the Psalms and the expressions of grief throughout the Psalter, making his cries their cries and the Psalm’s pain their pain, then true deliverance can be found. Such a hermeneutic is not to suggest a quick and simple fix. Instead, it is to propose that the Psalter ought to be embraced as the words of Christ, to be taken as our words, and offered back to the Father as our prayer. What is more, such an expression of our suffering finds the direct Biblical connection between the wounding of Christ and our healing. This insight is akin to what Isaiah 53:5 famously states: that Christ was wounded so we need not be wounded for our sins; Christ was bruised so we need not try and find alleviation out of our bruises; that it is through His stripes by which we find healing and true relief, not via our own stripes. Similarly, this same principle is evident in Christ’s interactions with Thomas, when He connects the disciples’ peace with the wounds of Jesus (John 20:26-28). And finally, along these very lines, the worshipers in glory find perfect comfort from the reality that the Lamb was the one slain and still bears in His resurrection body the marks of inflicted harm (Revelation 5:5-6). For it is from His willingly permitted injuries, we find substitutionary atoning peace with God. Drawing upon this concept as presented in the Psalms, of experientially reading our union and communion with Christ in his death and suffering, may be the very means necessary for the self-harmer to understand what Hebrews 10:1-2,10 attests to: that nothing (and no one else) needs to be wounded to clear one’s conscience and produce true and lasting peace.

Does this approach not palpably communicate to the sufferer that their High Priest is compassionate and understanding, acquainted with their griefs and their sorrows, tempted in every way that we are, yet without sin? Does such a practical application of this Christocentric hermeneutic of the Psalter not demonstrate the all-sufficiency of Christ's finished work on our behalf? That *He* has been harmed enough, so there need be no more willing and voluntary shedding of blood on account of believers? And is not this approach more thorough and wholistic than mere proof-texting against self-harm, such as citing Psalm 100:3 to say that God made our bodies, and, as His people, we ought to take care of what he has entrusted to us? While that latter hermeneutic is not detrimental, and certainly nothing can be suggested to disagree with such an approach, it provides far less depth and nearness to Christ than the former hermeneutic.

One final illustration of the Christological embracing of the personal Psalms should suffice. John Gill, the famous English Baptist pastor, scholar, and theologian of the 1700s, draws parallels between our Messiah's temptation in the Judean wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 1-13) and David's experience in the same Judean wilderness.<sup>50</sup> Just as Christ hungered and thirsted, so too, David is in a dry and weary land (Psalm 63:1). Christ is taken to look from the sanctuary and tempted to put God's power to the test (Psalm 63:2). Yet death is preferable to disobedience, and the word of the Lord is better than life-giving bread he was tempted with (Psalm 63:3-5). God was his help through the forty days and nights (Psalm 63:6-8), and the tempter and his followers will be cast in the pit (Psalm 63:10). Additionally, Christ was surrounded by wild beasts (Mark 1:13), as was David (Psalm 63:10), but the Messianic King shall be victorious without bowing to the Liar (Psalm 63:11). The Christological parallels are striking. How then could this Psalm experientially be used by the one tempted to self-harm?

Verse 1: God, You are my God, and I am Your true child. I seek You immediately because my spirit *and my body* are disquieted.

Verse 2-5: I look to Your heavenly sanctuary for help and deliverance. Because You are more important to me than any *feeling* that I am alive. You are all satisfying to me, I do not need anything besides You to find contentment, peace, and joy.

Verse 6-8: I keep You before me at all times of my temptation: at night, when I am tempted toward disobedience; during the day, when I am tempted with the same. You are the one who is guiding me and leading me. I am following you just like Jesus was led into the wilderness of temptation by your Spirit (Matthew 4:1). Even a time as tremendously challenging as that, you were guiding his path, as You are mine now.

Verse 9-10: The tempter, the liar, the deceiver, the accuser of the brethren wants to harm my life and my body. He desires that I die and be destroyed. He wants nothing more than for me to fail and to destroy my flesh. But You have promised that he will be the one to perish and he will be the one overcome, not me.

Verse 11: I am one of Your people who swears by the King. You have promised that I will rejoice, that I will glory and receive glory. Just as Christ triumphed over every temptation, You have promised me a way of escape under every temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13). The one who is tempting me right now will one day be permanently silenced! How I thank you for that promise of deliverance!

Surely more could be said about each of the above-cited Psalms, and each of the 150 Psalms could be expounded and unpacked in a similar fashion. Not artificially inserting Christ into every Psalm, trying to find Him where he is not, but allowing the Christology to naturally arise

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<sup>50</sup>John Gill's Exposition of the Bible.

out of the content of the Psalter. Such Christocentricity, coupled with the experiential singing or reading of the Psalms, should produce in the counselee a nearer fellowship with Christ in his sufferings and a fuller expression of their sufferings unto Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Self-harm is, unfortunately, a prevalent and destructive practice, even within our church communities. Additionally, it is not a behavior that will be vanishing from the earth any time soon. Thankfully, the Scriptures, and more precisely, our God, know full-well about this deeply disturbing and dark conduct inflicted upon our young people. Therefore, God has provided true spiritual help, and a sufficient emotional balm in his Word. He has squarely set such help in the center of our Bibles, as an anatomy of the human soul, by which we express our every emotion in a holy and inspired way, while, at the same time, that same book is ever-conforming us to the pattern and image of Christ. Most specifically, as we take up and use His hymnbook of praise, we commune, in first person language and identification, with our suffering Savior who has already fully bled and been harmed on our behalf. So far as we can better assist our parishioners and counselees in seeing and singing of Christ in these divinely inspired songs, we will further enable them to express their temptations and struggles in a Christ-centered way. The more they are able to cry out for divine empathy and help, they will be less inclined to cry out through the method of physical harm. And finally, if we can support our counselees in communing with Christ through the very words of Christ, ideally, they will see their full neediness as having been sufficiently met in him, their empathetic and ever-present help in their distress (Psalm 46:1).