

Feeling the Fall: A Biblical-Theological Examination of Melancholy as an Emotional Mirror of a Fallen World

by Brian R. Hand¹

There is a kind of darkness that can be felt—really felt. Some people live as though already entombed. No matter where they turn, there is no path. No matter how hard the eyes strain, there is no light, only tears. Darkness rushes in, presses down. Its weight is immense, interminable, insufferable. They claw for relief as a drowning person gasps for air, but there is no rescue, no escape. They sink until their emotions are ready to give out, exhausted. They live in a darkness that swallows up light. Pleasure itself becomes a distant and distorted memory. For a while those who are so entombed can mask their failing energy and increasing lethargy of spirit. The resilient last longer than most, but many who fall into this mist and shadow eventually succumb to a crushing gloom.

Melancholia—on a spectrum from simple sadness to profound discouragement, then crossing a moral line into despair—marks nearly every life at some point. People often have strong opinions on melancholy—at least regarding its more serious and durable forms. Some assert that it is a disease. In reference to one form, clinical depression, Gary Kinnaman and Richard Jacobs assert, “Depression is not grief. It is not sadness. It is not a person feeling sorry for themselves. Rather, the serious disease known as depression strikes at the welfare of body, spirit, and soul. In other words, it affects every part of us.”² Some well-intentioned but unskilled advice merchants declare that melancholy is always—or at least nearly always—sin.³ Sometimes authors start with their own presuppositions, personal

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² *Seeking in the Dark: Getting the Facts on Depression & Finding Hope Again* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2006), 53. See also Zack Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, 2014). “Contrary to what some people tell us, sadness is neither a sign of laziness nor a sin; neither negative thinking nor weakness. On the contrary, when we find ourselves impatient with sadness, we reveal our preference for folly, our resistance to wisdom, and our disregard for depth and proportion” (30). Notice that the authors differentiate other forms of melancholy (sadness in general) from depression. Compare the many books written by Paul Meier, who boasts about writing two to three books every year on depression. See, for example, *Blue Genes: Breaking Free from the Chemical Imbalances That Affect Your Moods, Your Mind, Your Life, and Your Loved Ones* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2005). Meier aggressively advocates the chemical theory of depression, and his books sound like an infomercial for the pharmaceutical industry as he constantly references various drugs he prescribes.

³ This mistake should *not* be confused with the hope offered by biblical counselors who recognize a close nexus between depression and despair but who also recognize that other forms of melancholy, like severe discouragement, can mimic some of the traits of depression. These counselors nuance the discussion by adding “despair” or “spiritual hopelessness” to the traits characterizing depression. For example, see Bud Calvert, *Emotional Victory: How to Deal with How You Feel* (Lancaster, CA: Striving Together, 2012). Having defined depression as despair, Calvert dismisses endogenous (arising from internal chemical or pathogenic) causes almost entirely. The Christian who struggles with severe discouragement but continues to hope in God has not, by this definition, become depressed. Representative statements include: “[Jesus] was never depressed, because depression was not an option” (41); “recognizing sin as the root of depression can be difficult” (46); “there is no person that can make me depressed. There is no circumstance that can make me depressed” (47). Note

experiences, personality, or theological traditions and later select biblical evidence to warrant a cherished position. And, given the complexity of human emotions and the breadth of biblical information on these emotions, one can find adequate, if mishandled, support in Scripture for every theory on melancholy—for instance, it is entirely endogenous (disease, chemistry, or malformity), entirely spiritual, entirely circumstantial, entirely emotional, or some combination of these.

Sorrow appears throughout Scripture, and the biblical evidence seems to run the gamut of mild sorrow (the rich young ruler in Matthew 22, whose sorrow was induced by personal sin) through severe despondency (Job and David among others, whose sorrow was induced by circumstance, sickness, or Satan) to depression with despair (Judas), and it does so without ever using modern, scientific designations.⁴ A biblical-theological examination of melancholy should help us nuance our understanding of human sadness, and it shows us that melancholy is an emotional reflection of a fallen world.⁵

Problems in Studying Melancholy

In any line of inquiry, the mind naturally runs to the instances *par excellence*. If we want to know what good basketball looks like, we do not start our research with non-athletes. Instead, we turn to Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and other “greats” in the sport. Similarly, when people think of melancholy, they do not normally think of passing sadness but of depression (or at least a depressive state). But important issues punctuate a consideration of depression.

Foundational Problems

Every study of the human soul, will, emotions, or intellect is fraught with difficulties. For instance, scientists recognize “that the human brain has close to one hundred billion neurons. Neurons release brain chemicals, known as neurotransmitters, which generate these electrical signals in neighboring neurons. The electrical signals propagate like a wave to thousands of neurons, which leads to thought formation.”⁶ But this statement merely describes how the existing brain does the process of thinking.

that definitions are vital, particularly when dealing with melancholy. Biblical counselors do not treat *sadness* as sin. They treat *despair* as sin. This means the reader or listener must take great care to discern which definition of *depression* an author or speaker is using: (1) profound sadness, (2) despair, or (3) something else (disease, malformity).

⁴ It is telling in the biblical examples selected for this sentence that the weakest form of melancholy (sadness) can have sin as its cause while one of the strongest forms of melancholy (severe discouragement) may be innocent. Of course, neither is always the case, and Scripture gives abundant evidence of both endogenous and exogenous melancholy with and without sin as its cause. Note that some biblical counselors use *depression* to reflect the additional trait of despair.

⁵ This paper does not address the specific, known sins that often attend melancholy. The emotional state of sadness produces certain specific tendencies in fallen creatures that wed their corrupted affections with an emotion to produce all manner of spiritual problems. For instance, it is well known that sadness can lead to hopelessness. It can also produce impatience, anger with God and others, sloth, acedia, and many other specific sins. Sadness can influence the human will so that the person then responds with faith or despair during times of profound discouragement. A discussion of the potential sins that stem from melancholy lies outside the scope of this paper.

⁶ Lina Begdache, “Ask a Scientist: Neurons Help Explain How Our Brains Think,” *PressConnects*, 27 March 2019, accessed 18 July 2023, <https://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2019/03/18/ask-scientist-how-do-thoughts-work-our-brain/3153303002/>.

It cannot tell the reader what thinking is, or how it occurs at a more foundational level. Mere electrical impulses do not constitute thought; otherwise, lightning would be the most intelligent of beings.

The same difficulties occur in the attempt to define emotions.⁷ We have a reasonable grasp of what emotions feel like. We understand that certain phenomena can cause (or at least influence) emotions, attend emotions, or result from emotions. We recognize that emotions intersect not only the body, intellect, and will, but also the spirit, so that emotions can generate (and be generated by) good and bad health, thoughts, decisions, and actions. But we still have not defined what emotions *are*. And God chose not to resolve the issue in his Word.⁸ Instead, the Bible focuses on the whole person—how each facet of our being influences other facets so that the child of God must guard his heart (Prov 4:23), his soul (Prov 22:5), his spirit (Mal 2:15), his body (1 Thess 4:4), and his actions (Ps 119:9; Luke 12:15) because of their respective ability to influence the whole person.

The inability to define emotion generally or a single emotion specifically to the satisfaction of philosophers, scientists, theologians, and counselors invites us to use inductive or phenomenological methods in studying the biblical evidence lest we stray into unwarranted assumptions.

The Problem of Diagnosis

One reason to resist an investigation of melancholy by modern psychiatric methods stems from the inability of psychiatry to produce evaluative criteria that are simultaneously reliable and valid. Take, for instance, a single, severe form of melancholy, *depression*. Although the medical community must stick to material, pathogenic causes, “no physical findings are specific to or diagnostic of depression.”⁹ In spite of this defect in methodology, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) declares that in 2020 alone “an estimated 21.0 million adults in the United States had at least one major depressive episode. This number represented 8.4% of all U.S. adults.”¹⁰ Of this number “an estimated 14.8 million U.S. adults aged 18 or older had at least one major depressive episode with severe impairment,” which often manifests as chronic pain, fatigue, inability to work, listlessness, anxiety, other mental disturbances, or suicidal ideation.¹¹ Moreover, numerous studies rank depression among the top five mental disorders—affecting at least 300 million people worldwide at any given

⁷ A number of older philosophers speak only of *affections* and *passions*. When secularists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coined the word *emotion*, some theologians pushed back on the concept—feeling that the recognition of the category of *emotion* is inherently secular. However, this perspective that rejects emotions altogether does not seem to reflect the full breadth of scriptural and empirical evidence. It seems that emotions are not affections or passions *per se*, but rather a difficult-to-define language by which mind, body, soul, affections, will, and passions communicate.

⁸ J. Alasdair Groves and Winston T. Smith observe, “The Bible doesn’t offer a technical answer to the question What are emotions?—as if testifying before a panel of psychological researchers. . . . What the Bible can teach us about emotions is there to guide us in our relationship with God and others.” *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 32.

⁹ Charles D. Hodges, *Good Mood Bad Mood: Help and Hope for Depression and Bipolar Disorder* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd, 2012), 40.

¹⁰ “Major Depression,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

time. The problem is so severe that “one in six people (16.6%) will experience depression at some time in their life.”¹²

While the weightiness of the NIMH and the self-proclaimed certainty of the medical community imply an objective standard for diagnosing melancholy, there are significant problems with this process. First, depression is not sadness. So researchers and writers that equate the two are merging distinct concepts. Second, some professionals question the validity of both these statistics and the associated methods of research. Charles D. Hodges, a medical doctor and theologian, observes that while diagnoses of depression increased over 300 percent in the ten-year span 1987–1997, this “rapid increase in the rate of depression was better explained by changes in the criteria used to make the diagnosis rather than as increase in the prevalence of the disease.”¹³

The same author observes that all attempts to articulate a defined material pathology for depression have failed. This is not to say that known diseases are unable to induce depression. Multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s, lupus, and many other illnesses can influence one’s propensity toward depression via unknown mechanisms. In addition, certain medications, trauma, and childbirth can provoke severe forms of melancholy, occasionally including depression—also by unknown processes. Scientists have proposed and dismissed, in succession, the theories that deficiencies in serotonin, dopamine, or norepinephrine cause depression.¹⁴ “Even today we do not know what the correct balance of serotonin, dopamine, or norepinephrine should be in the human brain.”¹⁵

Even prior to the lack of results from scientific investigations into material causes for severe forms of sadness, theologians turned to God’s Word for input; however, the word *depression* never appears in Scripture.¹⁶ Neither do its cognates *depressive*, *depressing*, *depressed* and *antidepressant*, or the associated words *clinical*, *mental illness*, *episode*, *dysphoria*, *bipolar*, *manic*, *mania*, *dysthymia*, *seasonal affective disorder*, or the milder words *mood*, *emote*, *emotion*, *melancholy*, or *despondency*.¹⁷ Depression warrants thorough study, but in any forms that involve despair or hopelessness, it is outside the

¹² “What Is Depression?” American Psychiatric Association, accessed 30 June 2023, www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression. Richard F. Berg and Christine McCartney cleverly label depression as “the common cold of the mind.” *Depression and the Integrated Life: A Christian Understanding of Sadness and Inner Suffering* (New York: Alba, 1981), 3.

¹³ Hodges, 13n2. It is unfortunate that Hodges references depression as “disease,” but he is arguing against the accuracy and reliability of the DSM even when measured by its own standards.

¹⁴ Meier rather oddly asserts as objective fact what the scientific and medical communities know is merely unproven theory: “Four key chemicals—serotonin, norepinephrine, dopamine, and GABA . . . —are responsible for influencing your ability to experience love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, humility, energy, motivation, memorization, concentration, a positive attitude, self-acceptance, your dreams, and sanity itself” (1). Note that Meier actually links virtue with chemistry. It would seem that to him the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) is merely the fruit of healthy chemistry.

¹⁵ Hodges, 45. Specifically, scientists have attempted to treat depression via drugs designed to inhibit the re-uptake of these neurotransmitters so that they remain more readily available in the brain. All such pathological investigations have hit a dead end. Though the chemical imbalance theory has prevailed for fifty years and has been the subject of numerous studies, inadequate evidence exists to support it.

¹⁶ The Holman Christian Standard Bible does include the word *depression* five times in Psalms 42–43 and Lamentations 3. It also shows the contrast to depression in Psalm 43:5 to be “hope in God.”

¹⁷ A single reference in the New American Standard Bible (Exod 6:9) does refer to *despondency*, but this is a dynamic translation of a phrase in Hebrew.

purposes of this paper. This absence of modern designations for the more severe forms of melancholia in Scripture leads to several possibilities:

1. Melancholy is a modern phenomenon that did not occur in the premodern, biblical era.
2. Melancholy is an illusion; therefore, Scripture need not address it.
3. Melancholy occurred in the past, but Scripture treats it only by encouraging positive counter-emotions.
4. Melancholy occurred in the past, but Scripture treats it only by critiquing its sinful characteristics.
5. Melancholy occurred in the past, but Scripture uses different phrasing to express it.

The trans-temporally recognizable characteristics of melancholy discredit options (1) and (2). Historically, Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BC) described melancholy (μέλας + χολή, literally “black bile”) as resultative from an excess of certain bodily fluids. While his analysis of the cause seems humorous to us (pun intended), his awareness of its symptoms was sound enough. Aretaeus of Cappadocia (second century AD) listed dullness, dejection, and torpor among the key traits that help the physician diagnose melancholy. Caelius Aurelianus, writing in the fifth century AD, concurs: the onset of melancholy is identifiable through its characteristics of dejection, silence, brooding, and occasionally a death wish. Melancholy cannot be merely a modern phenomenon or an illusion if it persists across millennia and exhibits identifiable traits.

A number of church fathers seem to have adhered to some form of (3) or (4), reasoning that since “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23); and since Jesus and Paul seem to have a dim view of “fainting” (ἐγκακέω) in Luke 18:1, 2 Corinthians 4:1, Galatians 6:9, and 2 Thessalonians 3:13, anything that seems antithetic to these traits must be evil.¹⁸ This thinking led a number of theologians in the second and subsequent centuries to treat the stronger forms of melancholy as vices warranting criticism.¹⁹

The instinct to avoid sin reflects spiritual prudence, but the instinct to treat select emotions as entirely immoral might exhibit a category error. *Love* in Scripture is not always an emotion (though it produces analogous emotions). It is in this context a virtue (also described in 1 Corinthians 13). Joy is not strictly identical with happiness (though it may result in happiness) but is sometimes a spiritual delight in God and his work that may operate while a person is sad. Peace is not always an emotion (though it has emotional implications). It can be a spiritual wholeness and soundness that generates tranquility of spirit in the midst of turmoil. Similarly, patience, kindness, and the remainder of the fruit of the Spirit are more properly described as virtues in Galatians 5, not emotions. While virtues/vices and emotions influence each other, and while some of the same words describe both

¹⁸ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁹ John Cassian listed λύπη and ἀκηδία as distinct but core sins that lead to a number of other sins. The Latin fathers used *tristitia* in place of λύπη to describe melancholic tendencies. In both instances, they left little room for depression as anything other than a sin.

virtues and emotions (e.g., love), they are not always identical. Juxtaposing an emotion to a virtue can create a fallacy of false equivalence. It contrasts dissimilar concepts inappropriately. In addition, emotions are notoriously complex—they can be stacked! A person may experience sadness and happiness simultaneously. Sadness may reflect loss of a child, while simultaneous happiness may reflect another child's recent salvation. Scripture nowhere requires the renunciation of the former in order to possess the latter. In fact, Paul rather clearly indicates that sorrow continues to exist, but that God's people do not sorrow in isolation from hope (1 Thess 4:13). This stackability of dissimilar emotions does not imply a corresponding stackability of virtues with vices. It would be impossible, for example to have joy simultaneously with the despair that is often characteristic of depression. The Christian must give up any sense of despair or hopelessness as a matter of obedience to God. He cannot maintain a virtue (joy) and a corresponding vice (despair) at the same time. Until and unless theologians investigate the nature and kinds of melancholy as revealed in Scripture, they must reserve judgment on whether certain forms of profound melancholy are inherently sinful (and not primarily emotional, pathogenic, or morally neutral). After all, sound theologians do not wish to be as guilty as psychiatrists of postulating a universal cause without adequate evidentiary support.

This leaves option (5), namely, that some form of severe melancholy has occurred throughout human history since the Fall, but Scripture uses different phrasing to express it. This solution is empirically testable and can yield a clear set of biblical data relating to melancholy. We need not be able to define exactly what an emotion *is* in order to discuss what a specific emotion looks like. Common human experience intuits that anger is not the same as tranquility, but it also differs from sadness. Anger responds to a violated sense of justice (or a standard of right and wrong), however corrupted that sense of justice might be. Melancholy occurs in response to loss (sometimes inarticulable) or pain (including internal pain of a guilty conscience). In order to qualify as an expression of melancholy, a text ought to exhibit (1) loss coupled with (2) an emotional response to that loss.²⁰ We have already observed that the Bible never uses modern, clinical designations of melancholy; so the emotional response to loss may take the form of emotionally laden, picturesque language.

Scripture is strikingly metaphorical when it addresses melancholic states. Some of the most poignantly brooding Psalms (such as Ps 88) have almost no direct reference to sorrow at all. Instead, they are full of images that reflect profound discouragement or sadness. Table 1 exhibits the figures of speech that occur in this psalm.

²⁰ There is another possible avenue for exploration in this regard. Some people experience sadness but cannot identify a specific pain or loss that is causing that sadness. This does not mean that one is missing. The Fall is an adequate loss to produce sadness even among unregenerate people who cannot articulate the reason for that sadness. In the Fall, humanity lost a kind of fellowship with God that was intuitive, automatic, and holy. In the Fall, humanity lost a perfect earth and a life of perfect purpose. A portion of the malaise of spirit that is evident in the world is, of course, directly due to sin, but a portion of it may relate to the spiritual awareness that inheres in us (e.g., Eccl 3:11, "he has put eternity into man's heart).

Table 1. Figures of Speech in Psalm 88²¹

Metonymy	My life draws near to Sheol
Metonymy	Those who go down to the pit
Simile	Like one set loose among the dead
Simile	Like the slain that lie in the grave
Simile	Like those whom you remember no more
Metonymy	In the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep
Metaphor	You overwhelm me with all your waves
Metonymy	My eye grows dim
Metaphor	Dead, departed, grave, Abaddon, darkness, land of forgetfulness
Metaphor	Wrath has swept over me
Metaphor	Dreadful assaults destroy me
Simile	Surround me like a flood
Metaphor	Close in on me together
Metonymy	Companions have become darkness

In its use of metaphor and other figures of speech, the divinely breathed-out record of human sorrow in the Psalms aligns more closely with the poets, who describe their profound grief as “the ‘crowding gloom,’ the ‘gathering murk,’ ‘the poisonous mood,’ ‘the howling tempest in the brain,’ ‘the interior doom,’” than with the clinicians and scientists.²² Yet it is precisely the poetry of the divine record that provides hope for those who suffer today. Scientifically precise labels are unnecessary. In fact, they can obscure the emotional states reflected in Scripture. Job, the Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and even the life of the Lord Jesus provide adequate input for us to see our own melancholy reflected, to parse its causes and effects, and to live in a fallen world in which we find ourselves grieving but not cast out.

A Problem of Definition

It is difficult to assemble biblical evidence regarding severe forms of melancholy. We do know that Judas’s experience (Matt 17:5) differs from the profound melancholy of the psalmists in that Judas despaired whereas the psalmists did not. But beyond this distinction between sorrow with and without hope, the Scriptures do not categorize the variations in human melancholy. Scripture does not use modern clinical phrasing; so how can the reader identify the biblical texts that address or depict what we now call depression versus those that describe profound sadness without despair?

²¹ Eswine observes, “[Andrew] Solomon then highlights the commonly used metaphors for depression of going over the edge of a cliff or falling into an abyss. William Styron likewise leaned upon the images of drowning and suffocation to attempt description of his affliction” (68). Additionally, “historian Stanley W. Jackson wrote about this necessary use of metaphor in his *Melancholia & Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*. Jackson found ‘no literal statement,’ no one-word diagnosis, that was able to describe adequately the diversity of our sadnesses along with their varying fits of gloom and mood. What he found instead were two recurring word-pictures: ‘being in a state of darkness and being weighed down’” (69). Note that the author blends depression with profound sadness while many biblical counselors would reserve the word *depression* exclusively for the profoundly sad state *coupled with* despair.

²² *Ibid.*, 71–72.

The reader could surmount this obstacle by yielding to the conclusions of secular psychology, but this approach is unnecessary. Words usually reflect shared human experience. This commonality makes the essential characteristics of words and even feelings self-evident. There is still significant room for debate regarding the influences, effects, and essential nature of an emotion even when we agree on its basic characteristics. In working from the most extreme melancholic state of depression back to simple sadness, we will use the DSM-5-TR characteristics of a major depressive disorder as a starting point—though we will heavily qualify the inclusions and conclusions derived from that diagnostic list.²³ These characteristics include the following:

1. Depressed mood.
2. Loss of interest/pleasure.
3. Weight loss or gain or loss of interest in eating.
4. Insomnia or hypersomnia.
5. Psychomotor agitation or retardation.
6. Fatigue.
7. Feeling worthless or excessive/inappropriate guilt or loneliness.
8. Decreased concentration.
9. Thoughts of death/suicide.

According to the DSM, each symptom must last for two or more weeks, must occur pervasively either every day or nearly every day, and must rise to a level of intensity that transcends normal sadness. That last phrase is crucial. The DSM-5-TR treats depression as a major step beyond normal sadness. In addition, the sufferer must experience five or more of these symptoms to be classified as depressed. Although this list purports to be diagnostic, and although the medical community uses the list in precisely this fashion, the DSM-IV admits that “no laboratory findings that are diagnostic of a Major Depressive Episode have been identified.”²⁴ The DSM-5-TR updates the clinical evidence nearly thirty years: “Although an extensive literature exists describing neuroanatomical, neuroendocrinological, and neurophysiological correlates of major depressive disorder, no laboratory test has yielded results of sufficient sensitivity and specificity to be used as a diagnostic tool for this disorder.”²⁵ Hodges deduces an additional problem with the DSM traits: “The problem with these criteria as a diagnostic tool is that they include feelings and experiences that almost everyone has in the course of normal life. Far too many normal things are said to be indicators . . . according to these criteria.”²⁶ In fact, using these “diagnostic” criteria, some case studies found an eighty percent incidence rate of major depression

²³M. B. First, ed., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, 5th ed., Text Revision (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2022), 183.

²⁴ Cited in Hodges, 24n1.

²⁵ First, 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

among the general population.²⁷ Finally, imposing a two-week duration of symptoms as a metric presupposes that all sorrows warrant short periods of grieving or that mere passage of time constitutes a radical upgrade in the level of sadness involved. These assumptions are neither scientific nor sensible.

Profound loss can and ought to induce stronger and longer grief. One might grieve the loss of a job and the loss of a child for significantly different periods of time and with significantly different intensities without the latter’s automatically becoming a different category of grief altogether. Yet both outside and inside the church, people have grown uncritically accustomed to the label *depression* without distinguishing it from normal, but profound, sadness. Given the serious limitations of the DSM diagnostic criteria, it is better to grant that while these criteria work as a starting point for recognizing some form of severe melancholic state, they cannot truly discriminate between sadness and depression. Melancholy, even in its most intense forms, does not entail despair or hopelessness.²⁸

Characterizing Melancholy

This conclusion encourages us to focus on the qualities of sadness in Scripture. The DSM traits relating to depression do *characterize* severe melancholy, but they lack diagnostic capability—being unable to discriminate legitimate (though profound) sorrow from despair. So if we search the Scriptures for the characteristics of sadness (in both exact words and metaphorical expression), we gain an appreciation for what God says about melancholy. All of the DSM traits appear in Scripture, and they tend to appear in close and frequent conjunction with each other. Table 2 cross references the nine DSM criteria with the passages of Scripture most indicative of melancholy.

Table 2. Intersection of DSM Characteristics of Depression and Key Biblical Texts

	Sadness, grief, misery, sorrow	Loss of interest or pleasure	Changes in appetite	Trouble sleeping, no rest	Loss of energy, increased fatigue	Purposeless activity	Feeling worthless, guilty, rejected, lonely	Difficulty thinking, concentrating	Death ideation, wish, or obsession	Sustained over time, endless, interminable
1 Sam 1 (Hannah)	vv. 6–8, 10, 15ff.	v. 7	v. 7							v. 7
1 Sam 2 (Hannah)	v. 1		v. 5				vv. 1, 7			
1 Kgs 19 (Elijah)	v. 4				vv. 5–7	v. 4	v. 10		v. 4	

²⁷ Hodges illustrates the problem with the DSM criteria: “What would happen if the diagnostic standard for pneumonia included everyone who coughs?” (28).

²⁸ While not all biblical counselors use terminology in the same way, they all agree that despair involves sin. Some biblical counselors reserve the designation of *depression* for sadness that has crossed into despair. They prefer designations like *severe despondency* or *profound sadness* to describe an extreme intensity of sorrow that retains hope in the Lord.

	Sadness, grief, misery, sorrow	Loss of interest or pleasure	Changes in appetite	Trouble sleeping, no rest	Loss of energy, increased fatigue	Purposeless activity	Feeling worthless, guilty, rejected, lonely	Difficulty thinking, concentrating	Death ideation, wish, or obsession	Sustained over time, endless, interminable
Job 3	vv. 20–24	vv. 6–7	v. 24	vv. 13, 17, 26	v. 13		v. 23	vv. 3–12	vv. 3–19, 21–22	v. 26
Job 6	v. 2		vv. 5–7		vv. 11–12		vv. 4, 27	vv. 3, 10, 26	v. 9	v. 11
Job 7	vv. 1, 11	v. 7		vv. 4, 13–14		v. 3	vv. 16, 19	vv. 7, 9, 16	vv. 15–16	vv. 2–3
Job 10	v. 1					v. 8	vv. 15–17	vv. 2ff., 20	vv. 1, 18–22	vv. 16–17
Job 16	vv. 1, 16, 20		v. 8		vv. 2, 15		vv. 2, 7, 9–14	vv. 11–14	v. 22	v. 14
Job 17	vv. 1, 7	v. 7		v. 12	v. 7	v. 11	vv. 2, 6	v. 12	vv. 1, 11, 13–16	v. 15
Job 19	v. 2					v. 8	vv. 2, 11–19	v. 7		vv. 8, 10
Job 30	vv. 16, 31			v. 27			v. 20		v. 23	v. 26
Job 31 (Elihu)	v. 19	v. 20	v. 20						v. 21	
Ps 6 (David)	vv. 2, 6			v. 6	v. 7		vv. 1, 4		v. 5	v. 3
Ps 13 (David)	v. 2						v. 1	v. 2	v. 3	v. 1, 2
Ps 38 (David)	v. 6	v. 10			v. 10	vv. 13, 14	v. 1	v. 8		v. 15
Ps 69 (David)	vv. 3, 10			v. 3	v. 3		vv. 4, 11, 20		vv. 2, 15	
Ps 77 (Asaph)	v. 3	v. 2		v. 6		v. 4		vv. 3, 6		v. 7
Ps 88 (Heman)	vv. 3, 9				v. 4	vv. 10–12	vv. 5–7		vv. 3–6	v. 1, 17
Ps 102 (Unknown)	vv. 5, 9	v. 4	v. 4	v. 8	v. 23	v. 11	vv. 6, 10		vv. 3, 11, 23	v. 3
Lam 3 (Jeremiah)	vv. 1, 15, 49, 51	v. 17	v. 16	v. 17	v. 20	v. 9	vv. 10ff.	v. 17	v. 6	v. 3, 7
Lam 1 (Judah)	vv. 2, 4, 12, 16	v. 16	v. 20	v. 3	vv. 6, 13, 14	v. 17	vv. 2, 19		v. 20	v. 13
Jonah	2:1, 7; 4:1	4:5			2:7; 4:8		2:4	4:4, 9–11	2:5–6; 4:3, 8	4:5
Isa 53 (Jesus)	vv. 3, 4, 10–11						vv. 3, 4		v. 12	

	Sadness, grief, misery, sorrow	Loss of interest or pleasure	Changes in appetite	Trouble sleeping, no rest	Loss of energy, increased fatigue	Purposeless activity	Feeling worthless, guilty, rejected, lonely	Difficulty thinking, concentrating	Death ideation, wish, or obsession	Sustained over time, endless, interminable
Matt 26–27	26:37						27:46		26:38	
Mark 14–15	14:33						15:34		14:34	
Luke 22	v. 44				v. 43					

By DSM reckoning, a *secular* psychologist would likely conclude that Hannah, Elijah, Job, David, Asaph, Heman, the unknown author of Psalm 102, Jeremiah, Jonah, Jesus and possibly others in Scripture were clinically depressed (experiencing a “Major Depressive Episode”). But Hodges observes, “The tools given to us by the creators of the DSM—the nine criteria . . . —are unable to distinguish between normal and disordered sadness.”²⁹ So this dubious diagnosis that shoves all profound sadness into an undifferentiated lump called *depression* is not as helpful as recognizing the incredible depth and breadth of human sadness in Scripture. If a diagnosis is medical without a known pathogenic cause, the sufferer is left without many avenues of recourse (therapeutics, pain killers, alternative medicines). But if the *full* spectrum of sadness reflects normal human experience that relates to the intensity and duration of loss in a fallen world, there is hope. Table 3 charts such depths of sorrow.

Table 3. Key Biblical Descriptions of Profound Sorrow

Text	Key Descriptions
1 Sam 1	provoke grievously, irritate, wept, would not eat, weep, sad, deeply distressed, wept bitterly, affliction, troubled in spirit, pouring out my soul, anxiety, vexation
1 Kgs 19	afraid, take away my life, no better, I only am left
Job 3	perish, darkness, nor light shine, gloom, deep darkness, clouds, blackness, terrify, not rejoice, barren, no joyful cry, curse, trouble, die, expire, misery, bitter in soul, long for death, grave, sighing, no bread, groanings, fear, dread, not at ease, no rest
Job 6	vexation, calamity, heavier, rash, poison, terrors, tasteless, crush, cut off, exult in pain, no strength, driven from me, despairing, wind
Job 7	hard service, shadow, emptiness, misery, night is long, tossing, worms and dirt, hardens, breaks out, without hope, breath, never again see good, gone, fades, vanishes, Sheol, returns no more, anguish, bitterness, scare, terrify, choose strangling, death, loathe life, leave me alone, made me your mark, burden, lie in earth
Job 10	loathe life, complaint, bitterness, why contend, oppress, despise, destroyed me, clay, return to dust, disgrace, hunt like a lion, work wonders against me, vexation toward me, died, grave, darkness, deep shadow, gloom

²⁹ Hodges, 64. See also the fuller description of this problem on pp. 66–68.

Text	Key Descriptions
Job 16	pain, worn out, desolate, shriveled up, witness against me, leanness, torn, hated, gnashed at, struck, broken, seized, dashed, set up as a target, slashes open, pours out gall, breach upon breach, sackcloth, strength in the dust, red with weeping, deep darkness, scorn, tears, no return
Job 17	spirit is broken, days are extinct, graveyard, mockers, byword, men spit, eye dim, vexation, shadow, appalled, days are past, plans broken off, night, darkness, Sheol, pit, worm, descend, dust
Job 19	violence, no justice, walled up, darkness, stripped, broken down, hope pulled up, wrath, adversary, put far, estranged, stranger, foreigner, breath is strange, stench, despise, abhor, turned against, bones stick, destroyed, heart faints
Job 30	byword, humbled, calamity, terrors, passed away, poured out, affliction, night, racks my bones, pain, no rest, disfigured, mire, dust, ashes, cry, no answer, cruel, toss about, death, ruins, disaster, evil came, darkness, turmoil, never still, affliction, skin turns black, bones burn, mourning, weep
Job 31	pain, continual strife in bones, loathes bread, flesh wasted away, bones stick out, soul draws near the pit, death
Ps 6	languishing, bones troubled, soul troubled, how long, no remembrance, Sheol, weary, moaning, flood my bed with tears, weeping, eye wastes away, grief, weak
Ps 13	how long, forget, hide your face, counsel in my soul, sorrow all the day, sleep of death, shaken
Ps 38	no soundness, no health, heavy burden, too heavy, stink and fester, bowed down, prostrate, all the day, mourning, burning, feeble, crushed, groan, tumult of heart, sighing, throbs, strength fails, light of my eyes has gone, stand aloof, deaf, mute, ready to fall, pain is ever before me
Ps 69	waters to my neck, sink in deep mire, no foothold, deep waters, flood sweeps over me, weary with crying, throat is parched, eyes grow dim, hate me without cause, destroy me, attack me with lies, reproach, stranger, alien, humbled, fasting, sackcloth, byword, pit, distress, shame, dishonor, despair, no pity, no comforter, poison for food, sour wine, afflicted, in pain
Ps 77	cry, trouble, refuses to be comforted, moan, spirit faints, hold my eyelids open, cannot speak, spurn, never favorable, love forever ceased, promises at an end, forgotten, shut up compassion
Ps 88	cry, troubles, Sheol, pit, no strength, dead, slain, grave, remembered no more, cut off, depths, dark and deep, heavy, overwhelm, shun, horror, shut in, cannot escape, dim, sorrow, Abaddon, darkness, forgetfulness, cast away, hide your face, afflicted, terrors, helpless, swept over, dreadful assaults, destroy me, surround me, flood
Ps 102	cry, distress, pass away, smoke, bones burn, heart is struck down, like grass, forget to eat bread, loud groaning, bones cling, like a desert owl, lie awake, like a lonely sparrow, eat ashes, mingle tears with my drink, thrown me down, like an evening shadow, wither away, destitute, groans, prisoners, doomed to die, broken my strength, shortened my days
Lam 3	affliction, driven, darkness, no light, the whole day long, flesh wastes away, broken bones, besieged, enveloped, bitterness, tribulation, like the dead, walled about, cannot escape, heavy, cry, blocked, crooked, torn to pieces, bent his bow, target for his arrow, laughingstock, taunts, wormwood, gravel, ashes, bereft of peace, forgotten happiness, endurance perished, gall, bowed down, silence, dust, grief, eyes flow without ceasing, hunted, pit, lost
Isa 53	no form or majesty, no beauty, despised, rejected, man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, hide their faces, stricken, smitten by God, afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastisement, wounds, oppressed, opened not his mouth, stricken, grave, death, anguish, poured out soul to death
Jonah	distress, belly of Sheol, deep, heart of the seas, flood, waves, billows, driven from your sight, waters closed in, deep surrounded, went down, bars closed upon me forever, pit, fainting away, displeased, take my life (2x), faint, asked to die

Text	Key Descriptions
Matt 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22 ³⁰	sorrowful, troubled, very sorrowful, even to death, forsaken, greatly distressed, agony, sweat like drops of blood

An initial observation on this biblical data seems appropriate. Except in the case of Jonah, these expressions of sorrow—even to the point of severe despondency that *secular* clinicians would label depression—receive no condemnation. They are not declared to be wrong (nor are they declared to be right). Scripture treats them matter-of-factly as part of normal human experience. The Holy Spirit moves the writers of Scripture seamlessly between praise (Ps 103) and lament (Ps 102) without apology or rebuke for the sorrows that men feel. And in many psalms this shift is even more immediate because it is internal to the psalm. The praise of Psalm 89:1–37 gives place to the sorrows and agitation of Psalm 89:38–51 before swinging back again to praise in v. 52. Where God has not clearly condemned an action, thought, or feeling (especially sorrow, which he covers in such intimate detail and frequency), we would do well to tread lightly and hesitantly in pronouncing our own condemnation, lest we find ourselves numbered among Job’s “friends,” who, somewhat ironically, receive severe rebuke from God (Job 42:7–8).

Since the Scriptures address melancholy in significant detail, the biblical theologian has numerous avenues of research:

- Do *other* passages outside of the classic severe cases in Job, the Psalms, and Jeremiah indicate that sadness is always, often, seldom, or never sin?
- If there are forms of sadness that cross a moral line between right and wrong, what are their distinguishing characteristics?
- Do additional texts unfold the workings of sadness?
- How does God personally interact with those who are sad? Is the corrective for sadness one of rebuke, warning, encouragement, restatement of theological fact, or something else?
- What are the immediate causes/influences of melancholy?
- What consequences stem from melancholy? Even if the emotion is not sin in itself, does it *cause* sin?
- Do the Scriptures encourage us to avoid sadness?

³⁰ In Matthew 16:14, the disciples respond variously to Jesus’ question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Some said, “John the Baptist.” That is not difficult to understand. The Jews knew that John and Jesus preached the same message (“repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”; Matt 3:2; 4:17) in some of the same places (the Judean wilderness, alongside Jordan, outlying districts). Others said, “Elijah.” That is also easy to see. Both Elijah and Jesus performed miracles and spoke with a boldness that marked them as men of God. But the most puzzling assessment is this: “Jeremiah.” Jesus’ message, location, origin, background, and manner were radically different from Jeremiah’s; so what did people see to connect them? Possibly their *mood*. Jeremiah was a weeping prophet, apparently melancholic at times, and Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with griefs. While it is impossible to prove conclusively, it is conceivable that the connection the Jews saw between Jeremiah and Jesus centered on their emotional disposition.

- What does it mean that Jesus is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief? How close did he come to what secular clinicians today would call *depression*? And how did his profound sorrow differ from depression?

Our concern lies elsewhere. In both its endogenous and exogenous forms, melancholy seems to reflect a theological truth: the Fall has fatally marred this world and everything in it, especially those creatures made in the image of God. The Fall damaged the entirety of our being—body, will, intellect, spirit, and emotions.³¹ Melancholy is the emotion distinctly situated to express the Fall.

Key Theological Concepts

Two theological concepts guide a study of melancholy and the Fall. First, because God created humans as his image bearers, God's own emotions have direct bearing on what people should experience in response to their circumstances. Second, the Fall marred everything that adjoins humanity. A study of the effects of the Fall—both its stated and implied consequences—will guide the expectation of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate responses to the Fall.

Sadness in the Divine

Several passages indicate that God can experience sadness. This does not entail that he undergoes change, for his impassibility means that his sorrow must stem ultimately from his own essential being rather than its being “inflicted” on him externally.³² Ephesians 4:30 warns believers, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” *Grief* is the ordinary word *λυπεῖτε* in the imperative, directed at people, and in regard to what *they* do in reference to the Holy Spirit (since the Spirit is the direct object of the verb). Whatever impassibility *does* mean, it *cannot* mean that actions of God's people have no bearing on what God himself chose to describe as “grief” of the Spirit. Perhaps emotions do not represent *change* at all but an effulgence or instantiation of our inner person with all of its loves, hates, and values (affections). In this case, grief in this passage is not a change in the divine person but the intersection of what God loves and values with the corrupted values and actions of his people. God does not move or change, but our conduct may strike at what he loves and values so that it instantiates an emotion already inhering in his person and elicits the proper feeling in relation to that injured love or injured value. In this case, it is grief.

³¹ One might add or subtract specific components here depending on whether he holds a more synthetic or analytical view of humanity, but orthodox theology addresses the impacts of the Fall on the entirety of the human person.

³² As representative of the arguments defending impassibility, see Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2011), 462–70. But note that like many other systematic theologians, Geisler spends almost no time on the emotions that God does experience (five lines on p. 469). He is more concerned with defending the systematic-theological conclusions regarding divine impassibility than with specific biblical evidence for divine emotions. For a study that emphasizes the biblical-theological data, see Layton Talbert, “‘Greater Is He Than Man Can Know’: Divine Repentance and a Brief Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility & Affectability,” *JBTW* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 73–93, available at https://seminary.bju.edu/files/2022/03/JBTW2.2_Article05_GreaterIsHeThanManCanKnow.pdf.

We need not settle the debate regarding divine passibility or impassibility or arrive at a full comprehension of its meaning in order to recognize that Scripture attributes grief to the Spirit. This grief is based on a real “pain” incurred through the failure of God’s image bearers to respond in a fashion that reflects his glory as they ought. Humanity had (and has) a responsibility to reflect God’s person accurately and truly as his image bearers, and when we fail to do so through sin, God is deprived of his due (Rom 3:23)—a mystery to be sure, but a clear biblical statement nonetheless.

Jesus, too, experienced sadness—even profound sadness—but writers often feel the need to qualify this fact.³³ When we observe that “he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled” (John 11:33; cf. 12:27, 13:21) at the grief of others, that he himself “wept” (John 11:35) at loss, that “he began to be sorrowful and troubled” (Matt 26:37) when approaching the cross, or that he could be “grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5), we have evidence of sadness that corresponds to loss.

Finally, the Scriptures record God the Father feeling sorrow (and delight; cf. Matt 3:17). Hodges notes, “Remarkably, the first use of any word pertaining to sad, sadness, or sorrow appears in Genesis 6:6. There God said that he was ‘sorry’ that he had created man,” and it “grieved him to his heart.”³⁴ While Hodges overlooks the connection between “pain” (Gen 3:16, 17) and “grief” (6:6)—and so overstates the claim that Genesis 6:6 is the first reference to sorrow—his overall point still has value. After God explicitly announces the effects of the Fall, the “pain/grief” that the Fall caused was shared by God as a form of personal loss when his creatures strayed even further from him into darkness. Adam felt the Fall in specified forms of loss, but God felt certain effects of the Fall as well (Gen 6:6).

Given that God made humans in his own image (Gen 1:26–27), that Scripture appears to represent divine emotions, and that the emotion of sadness correlates to the losses brought by the Fall, it seems reasonable to conclude that human sadness may likewise reflect the Fall. Since God’s responses to the Fall are untainted by sin, it is, perhaps, too audacious to assume that *every* expression of profound grief is inherently sinful. The fact that all humans are marred does not necessitate that every action, thought, and feeling of a marred being—especially one who is redeemed by Christ—is sin.³⁵

³³ E.g., Geisler writes that Jesus’ divine nature did not suffer. Only his human nature did (468). While this position safeguards impassibility, it may be begging the question since it presupposes that there can be no sorrow at all in the divine nature. But this presence or absence of emotion in the divine is precisely the point to be tested. The divine nature could not suffer *physically* since the divine nature is not physical, but if Scripture implies that the divine nature can experience the emotion of grief or sadness, perhaps our philosophical theology should give place to what God has revealed about himself. Note as well that Geisler and others who defend strong impassibility tend to resolve the tension through an appeal to anthropomorphisms (the Bible describes God in human terms in order to communicate effectively). But Scripture provides more warrant for viewing humanity deo-morphically than it does for viewing God anthropomorphically. See Judson D. Greene, “At the Left Hand of the Son: God the Father’s Spatial Manifestation in Heaven” (unpublished MA thesis, BJU Seminary, 2020), for the biblical evidence that depicts a visible, localized manifestation of the Father’s person or presence in a fashion that implies Scripture may view humanity at least as deo-morphically as it speaks of God anthropomorphically.

³⁴ Hodges, 75. Is it accidental that the word used near the end of the verse to describe God’s feeling (עצב) appears in Genesis 3:16 and 3:17 (here a cognate, עֵצְבוֹן) to describe the “pain” that both the woman and the man would experience as a result of the Fall?

³⁵ Again, the debate is not whether the Bible presents the reality that there is no conduct of the wicked that is, in fact, righteous. Rather, are the sorrows of the redeemed inherently sinful?

The Nature of the Fall

Although Arminian and Calvinist theologians differ in regard to the nature of the imputation of Adam's guilt, orthodox Protestants recognize and confess that every human is fatally flawed spiritually, having inherited a sinful nature from Adam, and is unable to do good on his own. This does not mean that humans are as evil as possible. We could always commit more sin more grievously, more intentionally, and more extensively than we do at present. But we are marred in body, intellect, will, and spirit so that we are incapable of having a right standing with God through our own merit.³⁶

The Fall damaged humanity spiritually, socially, and physically. Its most notable effects include separation from God, loss of fellowship with him, loss of innocence, conflict (especially in fractured marital relationships), pain in childbearing, pain in daily work and survival, loss of peace and wholeness, expulsion from the garden, and physical death. Very soon, other losses would pile up as it became evident that humanity would now experience every form of sin and misery—the loss of humility, altruism, joy, love, peace, and truth. Every effect of the Fall displays both *pain* and *loss*. The pain that resulted from the Fall is explicit (Gen 3:16–17). The loss is often implicit. Every loss inflicts pain. Every pain is a loss. Loss and sadness connect so intimately that we describe those who do not experience sadness as a result of loss as *pathological*. Hodges observes, “If sadness is connected to loss, the history of normal sadness starts in the garden of Eden, the scene of humanity’s greatest loss.”³⁷ How is it that the world treats those who do exhibit profound sadness in the face of loss as mentally disordered (depressed) while it treats those who do not exhibit sadness in the face of loss as even more mentally disordered (pathological)? Something ought to give. And a sound theology of melancholy might orient believers to view the world as God does—handling sorrow in a more thoroughly biblical way regardless of how deep that sorrow may become.

Those who experience melancholy find that some within the Christian community perpetrate a bitter irony and injustice through intellectual preferentialism and bias. If a theologian has a precise and orthodox *intellectual* understanding of the Fall and its consequences so that he can define accurately the extent and nature of depravity, its effects on the earth, the deadness of the human spirit, and the necessity of external redemption and restoration, the theological community praises him. If that same person experiences profoundly dark *emotions* that are an accurate, direct emotional assessment of and response to the Fall (that is, he “*feels* the Fall”), the same theological community (well-intentioned, but uninformed friends) may treat him as spiritually immature or as actively sinning. Somehow, it is appropriate to philosophize about the Fall, but we dare not feel its effects (or at least admit that we do). Such intellectual prejudice treats mental accuracy regarding the Fall as more

³⁶ Any number of conservative theologians present the essential concept of total depravity effectively. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 494–504; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 62–70.

³⁷ “You can begin to sense the crushing emotional weight Adam and Eve must have felt, standing outside the garden and knowing they would never get back inside. . . . They could see all the good things they had lost. Fear of God replaced the fellowship they had enjoyed. Pain would be a part of childbirth. Toil would be added to labor because the ground would grow thorns and thistles as quickly as grain. An angel with a flaming sword stood at the garden gate to prevent their return. An uncertain world awaited them into which the ultimate Enemy had been introduced” (Hodges, 75).

true, real, and godly than emotional accuracy regarding that same Fall. Does melancholy not depict accurately the depth to which humanity has sunk? Far from being an unbridled and extreme reaction to “slight” and “temporary” reversals, melancholy—especially in its strong forms that approach depression—more accurately reflects the true depth and darkness of the current human condition than any optimist could. At the Fall, we lost everything worth having. That loss is worth grieving.

The Mirror of Melancholy

The entire world has experienced damage through the Fall, but it does not entail that people experience the depths of the Fall equally. The full spectrum of melancholy as exhibited in Table 4 mirrors the same stages of decay, degeneration, pain, and sorrow that exist around and in us.

Table 4. A Spectrum of Melancholy

Base-line living	Sadness	Despondency	Depression
Does not recognize loss	Normal response to loss Significant response to loss Grief, sorrow	Profound response to loss Dysthymia (despondency) Enduring sense of pain	Profound response to loss “Major depression” Long enduring sense of pain
Happiness Wholeness Views the world neutrally or optimistically	Temporary or iterative sense of pain Biblical self-image remains intact Death thought about only in terms of eventually joining a loved one	Traits mimicking depression but without its despair Significant irritability Longing for death	Loss of interest or pleasure in activities and eating Trouble sleeping/oversleeping Fatigue; torpor Purposelessness; abulia (lack of will) Feeling worthless Difficulty concentrating or thinking Death wish as inflicted by self
Emotional “health”	Emotional “health,” but undesirable condition	Emotional “sickness”	Emotional “flatlining”

A few crucial caveats are in order. First, Table 4 does not include despair since despair (in most cases excepting actual disease or trauma as its immediate cause) involves a hopelessness and faithlessness that has moved beyond a mere emotional state into a moral one. Despair (usually) involves sin. In addition, the biblical-counseling movement often uses the designation of *depression* to reference category four *with despair included*; that is, in order to communicate clearly, we have to understand what each position means by using key words such as *melancholy*, *despondency*, and *depression*. Second, the bottom row does not imply that melancholia relates *in fact* to disease. The materialist view of the human person (a purely pathogenic assessment of melancholy) finds warrant in neither Scripture nor medical science. There are, however, enough analogies between what happens in the physical and the emotional realms to warrant their juxtaposition. Moreover, the biblical authors use phrasing that refers to sadness metaphorically in terms of sickness and despondency metaphorically in terms of death. Therefore, while we must guard against a “disease mentality” toward melancholic states, we are on sure footing when we retain biblical imagery that conveys respective states of emotional health, sickness, and death. Finally, there is no strong allegiance to the number of divisions in the table. In

fact, a continuum would represent the spectrum of melancholy better than a fixed-column table can. Whether an analyst believes there are two, three, five, or more categories, the sense of progression from health through sickness to death appears throughout the created order.

The earth itself desperately needs divine hospitalization (Rom 8:19–23) and final resurrection (2 Pet 3:10, 12–13) to reverse the thousands of years of accumulated ruin since the Fall. Apart from divine intervention, everything in the created order is headed toward death in every possible way (heat death, resource death, human death, animal death, emotional death, spiritual death). (1) Because the biblical descriptions of severe melancholic conditions heavily utilize phrasing that pertains to death; (2) because medical diagnostics (as unproductive as they may sometimes be) recognize a strong death wish among those suffering from extreme forms of melancholy; and (3) because the personal reflections of those who have passed through profound, prolonged levels of sorrow involve a palpable darkness, heaviness, and torpor that reflects death, severe melancholy appears to be the emotional equivalent of flatlining. One reason that depressed people find no pleasure in any activity, have no desire to eat, spend so much time sleeping, and experience profound fatigue is that they are experiencing a sort of emotional near-death experience. While this assessment might, itself, seem hopeless, the biblical record points us to a God who raises the dead. Whether this takes the form of drawing out one who is sinking in quicksand (Ps 69:14), throwing a life preserver to the drowning (Ps 69:15), or reviving a dead heart (Ps 69:32), God can bring the dead to life; so he certainly can bring the “near dead” to life.³⁸

What Melancholy Shows

There is no simpler way to demonstrate that melancholy mirrors the pain and loss of the Fall than to look at the wealth of biblical evidence. Here we find an embarrassment of riches. Even leaving out the metaphoric descriptions of loss, ordinary words for grief occur hundreds of times in Scripture (some of the more common include *λυπέω* 90x, *λύπη* 65x, *κλαίω* 206x, *κλαυθμός* 49x, *ὀδύνη* 76x, *ὀδυνάω* 15x, *στενάζω* 33x, *πένθος* 57x, *ὀλολύζω* 22x, *θρηνέω* 34x; and these leave out words relating to pain and loss specifically, which would add many more). Methodologically, we must examine how the Fall and grief interrelate if we are to test the thesis that the melancholic emotions mirror that Fall.

Every instance of grief, sorrow, discouragement, and profound sadness in Scripture stems from and reflects the Fall. The Fall damaged the physical and social order so that every operation in this world has succumbed not only to the vanity of Ecclesiastes but also to pain and loss. The scientist who studies chemistry may rejoice in its structure while remaining unaware that the beauty and order in chemistry are broken. He observes a disordered order. Prior to the Fall, the chemistry of the human body functioned perfectly and harmoniously so that there was no pain, sorrow, and death. So when people experience genuine chemical problems that produce profound sorrow, that emotion accurately

³⁸ See my “The Prayer of Faith Will Save the Sick: Revisiting a Complex Passage in Light of Biblical Context—James 5:13–18,” *JBTW* 1, vol. 1 (Fall 2020): 44–68, available at <https://seminary.bju.edu/seminary-journal/volume-1-number-1-fall-2020/>. The intersection of that article with the present one may explain why depression requires intervention from spiritual leaders. If sufferers have emotionally “flatlined,” they may no longer be able to pray effectively for themselves. Perhaps God has designed his people to provide the emotional equivalent of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) for others who are suffering.

reflects a real loss experienced in the Fall. When a young person is isolated by her peers and she spirals into teen depression, her grief reflects the loss of companionship and the fracturing of relationships incurred in the Fall. If her well-intentioned but unskilled friends merely tell her to “cheer up” or admonish her that discouragement is sin, they do not always resolve the problem, because fundamentally the melancholic person knows (and has correctly assessed and felt) intuitively the loss brought about by the Fall. When the philosopher or historian investigates his respective field and finds an endless litany of dead ends, injustice, brutality, and nihilistic futility, and these precipitate his descent into emotional darkness, that darkness accurately reflects the trauma of the Fall. Glossing over the barbaric inhumanity of every generation, the mass slaughter, the totalitarian egoism of political rulers in every age, and the raw pointlessness of it all does not help. The world *is* as damaged as the historian observes. Humanity *is* cruel. Life *is* nasty, brutish, and short.³⁹ Table 5 plots the major effects of the Fall, which are themselves representative causes of grief.

Table 5. The Fall, Via Pain and Loss, as the Source of All Forms of Melancholy

	Representative Influences		Sinful Responses
The Fall	Physical Influences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hormonal (e.g., postpartum) • Genetic (e.g., hyperthyroidism) • Microbial (e.g., Covid-19) • Injury (e.g., head trauma) • Atmospheric (e.g., air pressure) • Suffering (e.g., ME, CFS, toil) 	Melancholia	Pride
	Emotional Influences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal sorrow intensified • Unresolved anger • Loneliness • Disaffection • Injustice (experienced) 		<i>Acedia</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ennui • Inertness • Torpor • Inactivity
	Intellectual Influences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philosophy (e.g., nihilism) • History (e.g., war/politics) • Projection (e.g., climate issues) 		<i>Tristitia</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despair • Hopelessness • Suicide
	Spiritual Influences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Underlying vice (e.g., anxiety) • Unanswered prayer • Unfairness of life 		<i>Ira</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrath • Anger • Impatience • Frustration

³⁹ Is it an accident that the philosopher Thomas Hobbes generated this expression in his *Leviathan*?

Melancholia speaks truth about the Fall.⁴⁰ Cain ought to have been grieved when God disapproved of his sacrifice (Gen 4:5). He really did experience the loss of divine favor, but he ought to have handled his grief differently. Lamech was right to feel sorrow over the “painful toil” of the curse (Gen 5:29); he understood the loss of harmony and peace that the Fall incurred. Hannah properly grasped another kind of loss—a loss that reveals a strikingly godlike quality all humans possess in their ability to grieve not only what is but what could be (1 Sam 1:5–11). We grieve loss in the past (regret, guilt, remembered sorrows). We mourn loss in the present (active sorrows). And we look toward the future and grieve losses that are yet to come. Hannah had not lost a child. She did not have a child to begin with. Her sorrow reflected loss, but it was a loss of what ought to have been, not a loss of what already had been.⁴¹ We experience loss when violence occurs to us or to someone we love (Gen 34:7), loss over our own sin (Gen 45:5), loss over the apathy of others (2 Kgs 13:19, which is also another example of an anticipated loss of a future blessing), loss of health (Ps 41:3), loss from threats made by others (Ps 55:2), loss from foolish children (Prov 17:21, 25), loss from discomfort (Jonah 4:9), losses due to natural disasters and war (Isa 19:10), and losses in death (2 Sam 19:3).⁴²

Nothing in Scripture specifies what God considers an acceptable duration for our grief. The sensitive soul may carry grief longer and bear its scars far more deeply than someone of even temperament, but every one of these griefs reflects the Fall.⁴³ In fact, like no other emotion we possess, sadness is a mirror of the Fall. Wherever there are tears, there is evidence of the Fall. Wherever you see sorrow—whether it is mild or morose—the Fall is written raw in emotion. Table 6 serves as both a foundation and a capstone to our theme by depicting expressions of sorrow throughout Scripture as directly correlated to the losses experienced by the Fall.

⁴⁰ “For the Christian, these emotions are literally a right and reasonable reaction to a fuller knowledge of the creation of which they are a part.” George A. Benson, *What to Do When You’re Depressed: A Christian Psychoanalyst Helps You Understand and Overcome Your Depression* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 11.

⁴¹ Hannah was not alone in carrying this burden of an unrealized desire. Genesis 30:1–2 depicts Rachel’s similar frustration over the lack of children, but it provides no evidence of her seeking the Lord in the midst of her sorrow until Genesis 30:22–24.

⁴² A poignant example of the loss of children to death comes from the private correspondence of Robert Lewis Dabney. A minister, chaplain, and theologian of the mid-1800s, Dabney lost three sons to diphtheria, two of which occurred within a week. His testimony is emotionally compelling: “When my Jimmy died, the grief was painfully sharp, but the actings of faith, the embracing of consolation, and all the cheering truths which ministered comfort to me were just as vivid; but when the stroke was repeated, and thereby doubled, I seem to be paralyzed and stunned. I know that my loss is doubled, and I know also that the same cheering truths apply to the second as to the first, but I remain numb, downcast, almost without hope and interest. When I turned away from Jimmy’s corpse to my lovely infant, my affections and fears seemed to flow out towards him with a strength both sweet and agonizing. I never tired of folding him in my arms, as the sweet substitute for my loss, nor of trembling for him also, lest the loss should extend to him. But when Bobby was taken, and our little one remained our only hope [of a lasting lineage], it seemed to me, I was both afraid and reluctant to center my affections on him. I feel towards him a mixture of weak, listless feelings and pain, not having the heart to be happy in his caresses, and not daring. This is strange, perhaps inexplicable. Death has struck me with a dagger of ice.” Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (1903; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977).

⁴³ “‘Normal sadness’ is something that happens to most of us when we lose something very important to us. . . . The intensity and duration of our sadness corresponds to the size and duration of the loss” (Hodges, 62).

Table 6. Select Texts Correlating Sorrow to the Fall

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
Gen 3:16	To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”	childbearing, fractured relationships	wellness, harmony
Gen 3:17–19	And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”	curse, pain (general), toil, death	shalom, ease, productivity, life
Gen 4:5; cf. v. 6	But for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry , and his face fell.	rejection	divine approval
Gen 5:29	And [Lamech] called his name Noah, saying, “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”	toil	rest
Gen 6:6	And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.	wickedness	unspecified
Gen 34:7	The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it, and the men were indignant and very angry , because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing must not be done.	sexual assault, shame	purity, honor
Gen 35:18; cf. 48:7	And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni ; but his father called him Benjamin.	death	life
Gen 42:38; cf. Gen 44:29; Gen 44:31	But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”	death of child	child’s presence
Gen 45:5	And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.	guilt	innocence
Gen 50:10	When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation , and he made a mourning for his father seven days.	death, deprivation of father	life, father’s presence
Exod 1:14	And made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.	toil, cruelty	rest, proper service relationships
Exod 3:7	Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings .”	toil, cruelty	rest, proper service relationships

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
1 Sam 1:4–10	But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly .	barrenness, provocation, irritation, marital tension	present favor, future child, peace, divine favor, understanding
1 Sam 2:33	The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men.	outcast, misery, death	ministry, prosperity
1 Sam 15:35–16:1	And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel?”	rejection	office
1 Sam 20:3	But David vowed again, saying, “Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he thinks, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved .’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.”	family dishonor, injustice	honor, justice
1 Sam 20:34	And Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, because his father had disgraced him.	family dishonor, injustice	honor, justice
1 Sam 25:31	“My lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself. And when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.”	injustice	justice
2 Sam 19:2–3	So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, “The king is grieving for his son.” And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle.	death, dishonor, defeat	son’s life, honor, victory
2 Kgs 13:19	Then the man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Syria until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Syria only three times.”	apathy, defeat	opportunity, victory
2 Chr 6:29	Whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow and stretching out his hands toward this house.	generalized pain	generalized loss
Esth 6:12	Then Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.	humiliation	honor, pride
Esth 9:22	As the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday.	threat, death, despoilment	peace, life, property

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
Ps 13:1–2	Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?	abandonment, oppression	divine attention, peace
Ps 31:10	For my life is spent with sorrow , and my years with sighing ; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away.	waste, weakness, guilt, illness	productivity, strength, righteousness, health
Ps 41:3	The LORD sustains him on his sickbed ; in his illness you restore him to full health.	illness	health
Ps 42:5, 11; cf. 43:5	Why are you cast down , O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.	dejection, anxiety	sense of favor, peace
Ps 55:2–4	Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan , because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me.	abandonment, fear, oppression, death	divine answer, peace, rest, life
Ps 69:20	Reproaches have broken my heart , so that I am in despair . I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none.	social attacks, pitilessness	social favor, pity
Ps 88:9–10	My eye grows dim through sorrow . Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?	weakness, rejection	health, divine favor
Ps 107:38–39	By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their livestock diminish. When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, evil, and sorrow .	decreased wealth, oppression	property, peace
Ps 116:3	The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish .	death	life
Ps 119:28	My soul melts away for sorrow ; strengthen me according to your word!	unspecified	unspecified
Ps 127:2	It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil ; for he gives to his beloved sleep.	toil, hardship	peace, rest
Prov 10:1	The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.	generalized	generalized
Prov 14:10	The heart knows its own bitterness , and no stranger shares its joy.	unspecified	unspecified
Prov 14:13	Even in laughter the heart may ache , and the end of joy may be grief .	unspecified	unspecified
Prov 15:3	A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.	unspecified	unspecified
Prov 17:21; cf. 17:25	He who sires a fool gets himself sorrow , and the father of a fool has no joy.	dishonor, shame	respectability, child
Prov 17:22	A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.	unspecified	unspecified
Prov 25:20	Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.	unspecified	unspecified

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
Prov 31:6	Give strong drink to the one who is perishing , and wine to those in bitter distress .	poverty, misery	resources, strength
Eccl 1:18	For in much wisdom is much vexation , and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow .	knowledge	simplicity
Eccl 2:22–23	What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow , and his work is a vexation . Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.	toil	rest
Eccl 7:2–3	It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.	death	life
Isa 1:5	Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint .	sickness, weakness	health, strength
Isa 8:21	They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry.	desolation, hunger	prosperity
Isa 15:2	He has gone up to the temple, and to Dibon, to the high places to weep ; over Nebo and over Medeba Moab wails .	desolation, destruction, humiliation	prosperity, strength, glory
Isa 19:10	Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed , and all who work for pay will be grieved .	usurpation and slavery	finances
Isa 35:10; cf. 51:11	They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.	weakness, sickness, aridness, wild beasts	strength, health, fertility, safety
Isa 53:2–5	For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.	dishonor, rejection, ostracism, injustice, torture, death, carrying sin	honor, exaltation, social connection, ease, life, living in purity
Jer 8:18	My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me.	destruction, dishonor	prosperity, honor
Jer 20:18	Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow , and spend my days in shame?	toil, shame	rest, nonexistence
Jer 45:3	You said, ‘Woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain . I am weary with my groaning , and I find no rest.’	maltreatment, reproach, weariness	honor, rest
Jer 49:24	Damascus has become feeble, she turned to flee, and panic seized her; anguish and sorrows have taken hold of her, as of a woman in labor.	weakness, fear, destruction	strength, confidence, prosperity

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
Lam 1:22	“Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint .”	injustice	justice
Dan 6:14	Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him.	injustice, inability to rescue	justice
Jonah 4:1	But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.	miffed sense of justice and revenge	destruction of enemies forestalled
Jonah 4:9	But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”	scorching sun	comfort, shade, ease
Matt 17:22–23	As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed .	deprivation, confusion	social connections, Messiah’s presence
Matt 18:31	When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed , and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.	injustice, cruelty	justice, kindness, mercy
Matt 19:22	When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful , for he had great possessions.	divestment of wealth	wealth
Matt 26:22	And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?”	betrayal	loyalty
Matt 26:37–38	And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled . Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful , even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”	relational rift, bearing sin, death	filial affection, purity, life
Mark 3:5	And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.	injustice, hardness of heart	justice, responsiveness
John 16:6	But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.	deprivation of fellowship	presence of a friend
John 16:20–22	Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament , but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful , but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish , for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.	deprivation of fellowship, physical pain	presence of a friend, painlessness
John 21:17	He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”	repeated questioning	loyalty
Acts 20:37–38	And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.	deprivation of fellowship	presence of a friend

Passage	Text	Effects of the Fall that Cause Sorrow	
		Pain	Loss
Rom 9:2	I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.	people dying w/o Christ	peace, joy, confidence
Rom 14:15	For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.	unease, sense of wrong, offense	harmony
2 Cor 2:1–5	For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain , who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained ? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears , not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. Now if anyone has caused pain , he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.	harsh words, sins, loss of respect, uncertainty, unrequited love	gentleness, purity, respect, certainty, love
2 Cor 2:7	So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow .	ostracism	harmony, fellowship
Eph 4:30	And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God	sin	purity
Phil 2:27	Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow .	death of friend	presence of friend
1 Thess 4:13	But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.	death, hopelessness	life, hope
1 Pet 1:6	In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.	trials, testing	tranquility, ease

Avenues for Application

A biblical-theological look at human melancholy trains our responses to the pain that is around and within us. First, the Church should strive to exercise great tenderness in handling cases of melancholy. As Job’s example demonstrates, friends may assume that a person’s distress must be causally connected with his own specific sins. In Job’s case, his friends were entirely wrong. But since they were wrong, then it would be unbiblical to conclude that Job’s sorrow that resulted from his losses was sinful. In four full chapters of God’s reconfiguring Job’s thinking (Job 38–41), God never rebukes Job’s discouragement. Job’s error lay in his “speaking without knowledge” about the way things ought to be in the world and with God. He entered into the realm of sovereignty and providence and spoke untruth. Job’s complaint was not untrue regarding the reality of personal losses or the spirituality of a prolonged emotional response to that loss. Rather, his error lay in challenging the right or authority of God to do as he pleases with his creatures in the process of accomplishing divine purposes and providence. As Layton Talbert observes, Job’s grief remained intact (however briefly) even once his relationship with God was restored.⁴⁴ Therefore, his profound grief was not treated by God as sinful.

⁴⁴ *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2007), 250–251.

Assuming that severe sadness is automatically and inevitably a reflection of specific sin makes no more sense (and is potentially no more accurate) than assuming that a man born blind must have sinned (John 9:2–3).⁴⁵ Jesus swiftly corrected this misguided thinking on the part of his disciples. By itself, melancholy is a reflection of loss—a loss that has actually occurred because of the Fall. Of course, sin can attend any emotional state. Happiness can result in drunken carousing (1 Pet 4:2–3) just as sadness can give way to despair (1 Sam 31:3–4). Wholeness and wellbeing can lead to passivity and self-satisfaction (2 Kgs 20:16–19) just as anger can produce violent outbursts (Exod 2:12; Num 20:10–11). Sin must be diagnosed independently of emotions, though emotions can provide a window into the soul by revealing the affections of the heart.

Second, Scripture addresses the full range of melancholic emotions by depicting them as part of normal human experience under the curse. Job and the Psalms, in particular, provide rich resources to guide our nearly unutterable cries so that we do not cross over into despair in the midst of depressive emotions. The Psalms invite the present-day sufferer to join in a prayer of outright anguish.⁴⁶ These texts do not pull punches in describing melancholy in terms of darkness, pain, and death. They also do not rebuke the sufferer who retains faith in the Lord while walking through the “pit,” “Sheol,” “deep darkness,” and “deep distress.” Like every other emotion, melancholy reveals what we value, love, and believe, but it does not have to be antithetical to faith.⁴⁷ By recognizing that God designed our emotions in such a way that melancholy actively mirrors the Fall, the sufferer may wield it as a tool to affirm how badly he feels without succumbing to the imprisoning assessment that melancholy is a disease that has no useful function. The Psalms view depressive emotions as an impetus and warrant for confessing how badly we hurt, how dark this world really is, and, therefore, how desperate and vital our faith really is. A faith that clings to God with eyes wide open to the realities of sin, sorrow, and suffering is, frankly, superior to a faith that knows nothing of sorrow. A life without sorrow says, “Life is good, and I trust God,” but a life punctuated with melancholy says, “Though he slay me (and it is a very real possibility under the Fall), I will hope in him” (Job 13:15). There is genuine value in experiencing melancholy that a non-sufferer never shares.

Third, while melancholy often “tells the truth” about the Fall, it does not tell “the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” It is a genuine mirror of reality, but it is also a defective mirror because it shows only part of the picture. It does no good to contradict the melancholic, “It’s not that bad,” while he correctly and accurately replies in heart, “Oh, yes, it is!” It also does no good to transfix oneself in

⁴⁵ Most such assumptions stem from well-meaning, popular-level pastoral care or peer-group input. Trained biblical counselors work very hard to discern the influences, life factors, and responses that are generating a person’s sadness so that they can evaluate whether sin is a factor, but they do not assume this up front.

⁴⁶ “What implication does God’s manner of using metaphor have for us? You and I need a language of sorrows and God teaches it to us. . . . When we look to the language of God given in the Bible, we find within it a language that the miserable would recognize as native and not foreign to the geography of their inward anguish. We begin gradually to speak and to refrain from speaking as those who know this terrain of anguish first hand. When such speaking takes place, realistic hope has a chance” (Eswine, 70–71). For a helpful resource in this regard, see Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

⁴⁷ Groves and Smith, 39.

the misery of one truth while neglecting the hope of other truths.⁴⁸ The mirror of our emotions may be both correct and incorrect in different ways simultaneously.

Affirming with the sufferer that life *is* as dark as he feels it to be, this world *is* as corrupt as he feels it to be, and the body, mind, and emotions *are* indeed crumbling can exhibit much needed sympathy.⁴⁹ This is not the *only* truth or *all* the truth, but it is the truth. It can be constructive, then, to recognize the full depth and rightness of sadness while guiding the severely discouraged person to reaffirm “the whole truth.” Recognizing that melancholy mirrors the Fall gives the biblical counselor the opportunity to affirm the decay that has touched everything in this world while insisting that the sufferer also see and confess the restoration that Christ has begun and will continue to eternity. We must not minimize the former in the rush to the latter, or we will seem disingenuous to the sufferer.

As counselors, we can help the sufferer remember that the people of God rest on him and voice a reliance on him even when they cannot see or feel him. Often, pain remains. There is no guarantee that God will deliver us from sadness of heart this side of the Fall any more than he guarantees deliverance from disease and death.⁵⁰ But though the pain remains, it can become like the pain of childbirth—giving rise to something of value, purposeful, God-designed—for that is his plan in all our suffering (Jas 1:12).⁵¹

For the people of God, the Fall will come to an end, swept away in a majestic display of divine power, wisdom, and compassion involving the redemption and glorification of our bodies, the creation of the new heavens and new earth, and the end of sorrow forever. Melancholy, that eminent emotional mirror of the Fall, will be forever shattered. We will never again know loss, for God will be with us.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them as their God.
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,

⁴⁸ “Real grief is not easily comforted. It comes like ocean waves rushing up the sand, subsiding back, only to roll in again. These waves vary in size, frequency, and intensity.” James W. Bruce III, *From Grief to Glory: Spiritual Journeys of Mourning Parents* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 56.

⁴⁹ “It was the most rational thing in the world for Elijah to be sick at heart and to desire to die. His miseries were not illusory but real. His wish for death did not reveal his insanity but demonstrated the opposite.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Faintness and Refreshing,” *MTP* (Ages Digital Library), 54:588.

⁵⁰ “I am sure that I have run more swiftly with a lame leg than I ever did with a sound one. I am certain that I have seen more in the dark than ever I saw in the light,—more stars, most certainly,—more things in heaven if fewer things on earth. The anvil, the fire, and the hammer, are the making of us; we do not get fashioned much by anything else. That heavy hammer falling on us helps to shape us; therefore let affliction and trouble and trial come.” Eric W. Hayden, *Searchlight on Spurgeon: Spurgeon Speaks for Himself* (Pasadena: Pilgrim, 1973), 178.

⁵¹ Eswine lists benefits that accrue from suffering that are difficult to be gained any other way: “*Sorrows deepen our intimacy with God*” (139). “*Sorrows enable us to better receive blessings*” (140). “*Sorrows shed our pretenses*” (140). “*Sorrow exposes and roots out our pride*” (141). “*Sorrow teaches us empathy for one another*” (141). “*Sorrows allow small kindnesses to loom large*” (141). “*Sorrows teach us courage for others who face trials*” (141). C. S. Lewis famously observed, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 91.

and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,
for the former things have passed away.” (Rev 21:3–4)