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[Home](#) > [2009](#) > [March](#) *Christianity Today, March, 2009*

COVER PACKAGE

Light When All Is Dark

Our theology makes all the difference in fighting depression.

Kathryn Greene-McCreight | posted 3/04/2009 10:22AM

*Lord Jesus Christ, you are for me medicine when I am sick;
you are my strength when I need help;
you are life itself when I fear death;
you are the way when I long for heaven;
you are light when all is dark;
you are my food when I need nourishment.*
—Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

In his *Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis says that suffering is uniquely difficult for the Christian, for the one who believes in a good God. If there were no good God to factor into the equation, suffering would still be painful, but ultimately meaningless, because random. For the Christian, who believes in the crucified and risen Messiah, suffering is always meaningful. It is meaningful because of the one in whose suffering we participate, Jesus. This is neither to say, of course, that suffering will be pleasant, nor that it should be sought. Rather, in the personal suffering of the Christian, one finds a correlate in Christ's suffering, which gathers up our tears and calms our sorrows and points us toward his resurrection.

In the midst of a major mental illness, we are often unable to sense the presence of God at all. Sometimes all we can feel is the complete absence of God, utter abandonment by God, the sheer ridiculousness of the very notion of a loving and merciful God. This cuts to the very heart of the Christian and challenges everything we believe about the world and ourselves.

I have a chronic mental illness, a brain disorder that used to be called *manic depression*, but now is less offensively called *bipolar disorder*. I have sought help from psychiatrists, social workers, and mental health professionals; one is a Christian, but most of my helpers are not. I have been in active therapy with a succession of therapists over many years, and have been prescribed many psychiatric medications, most of which brought quite unpleasant side effects, and only a few of which relieved my symptoms. I have been hospitalized during the worst times and given electroconvulsive therapy treatments. All of this has helped, I must say, despite my disinclination toward medicine and hospitals. They have helped me to rebuild some of "myself," so that I can continue to be the kind of mother, priest, and writer I believe God wants me to be.

During these bouts of illness, I would often ask myself: How could I, as a faithful Christian, be undergoing such torture of the soul? And how could I say that such torture has nothing to do with God? This is, of course, the assumption of the psychiatric guild in general, where faith in God is often viewed at best as a crutch, and at worst as a symptom of disease.

How could I, as a Christian, indeed as a theologian of the church, understand anything in my life as though it were separate from God? This is clearly impossible. And yet how could I confess my faith in that God who was "an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1) when I felt entirely abandoned by that God? And if this torture did have something to do with God, was it punishment, wrath, or chastisement? Was I, to use a phrase of Jonathan Edwards's, simply a "sinner in the hands of an angry God"?

I started my journey into the world of mental illness with a postpartum depression after the birth of our second child. News outlets are rife with stories of women who destroy their own children soon after giving birth. It is absolutely tragic. Usually every instinct in the mother pushes toward preserving the life of the infant. Most mothers would give their own lives to protect their babies. But in postpartum depression, reality is so bent that that instinct is blocked. Women who would otherwise be loving mothers have their confidence shaken by painful thoughts and feelings.

Depression is not just sadness or sorrow. Depression is not just negative thinking. Depression is not just being "down." It's walking barefoot on broken glass; the weight of one's body grinds the glass in further with every movement. So, the weight of my very existence grinds the shards of grief deeper into my soul. When I am depressed, every thought, every breath, every conscious moment hurts. And often the opposite is the case when I am hypomanic: I am scintillating both to myself, and, in my imagination, to the whole world. But mania is more than speeding mentally, more than euphoria, more than creative genius at work. Sometimes, when it tips into full-blown psychosis, it can be terrifying. The sick individual cannot simply shrug it off or pull out of it: there is no pulling oneself "up by the bootstraps."

And yet the Christian faith has a word of real hope, especially for those who suffer mentally. Hope is found in the risen Christ. Suffering is not eliminated by his resurrection, but transformed by it. Christ's resurrection kills even the power of death, and promises that God will wipe away every tear on that final day. But we still have tears in the present. We still die. In God's future, however, death itself will die. The tree from which Adam and Eve took the fruit of their sin and death becomes the cross that gives us life.

The hope of the Resurrection is not just optimism, but keeps the Christian facing ever toward the future, not merely dwelling in the present. But the Christian hope is not only for the individual Christian, nor for the church itself, but for all of Creation, bound in decay by that first sin: "Cursed is the ground because of you ... It will produce thorns and thistles for you ..." (Gen. 3:17-18). This curse of the very ground and its increase will be turned around at the Resurrection. All Creation will be redeemed from pain and woe. In my bouts with mental illness, this understanding of Christian hope gives comfort and encouragement, even if no relief from symptoms. Sorrowing and sighing will be no more. Tears will be wiped away. Even fractious brains will be restored.

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of your glory and dominion, world without end. —John Donne (1572-1631)

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