

How the Bible can help with mental health – Gary Steel

Transcript of a *Wilderness Conversations* interview, April 2025

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The interviewer is Stephen Dodson.

Stephen:

Gary Steel is a member of the Riverwood Ecclesia in Sydney, and he joins me on Wilderness Conversations today to talk about four new talks which have just been published. on christadelphianvideo.com so that's www.christadelphianvideo.com also available on YouTube at Christadelphian video again one word so Gary's just recently published a set of four talks entitled how can the Bible help you with mental health Hi, I'm Stephen Dodson. I'm a member of the Riverwood Ecclesia, which is an ecclesia that meets in Sydney. And I'm the host of the podcast Wilderness Conversations, which is available on Apple and Spotify and also available on YouTube. And today I'm pleased to be speaking with Gary Steele, who's also a member of the Riverwood Ecclesia in Sydney. And we're having this conversation on behalf of the Christadelphian Video Network. That's christadelphianvideo.org... It's available at the website and also has a YouTube channel at Christadelphian Video. And recently on Christadelphian Video, Gary has published 4 talks entitled *How the Bible Can Help with Mental Health*. And the tagline is *How the Bible Aids in Positive Mental Health* and it's four studies.

[See <https://christadelphianvideo.org/studyvideo/how-the-bible-aids-positive-mental-health-4-studies-gary-steel/>]

So welcome Gary and thanks for agreeing to do a bit of an introduction to these talks.

Gary:

Thanks, Steve. It's a pleasure.

Stephen:

Thank you. Let's start by just talking about yourself, Gary. Some people know you, but a lot won't. Tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and how you found out about the gospel message.

Gary:

Okay, thanks, Steve. Yeah, well, like you, I grew up in a Christadelphian home, so I was entrenched in Sunday school and young people's activity and all that kind of thing. But I guess When I got to about 20 years of age, I started getting more involved in Bible study and doing Bible talks, both in terms of gospel lectures and also Bible study. And I was deeply involved with our young people circle for about 10 years as well. So, and that pretty much has continued till now, which is about 50 years in all.

Stephen:

And you've done these studies called, well involved with mental health. In what way are they connected with some of your experience through your work life and the work that you've done in the Ecclesia?

Gary:

Okay, yes, well, I've always had a bit of an interest in personal development and mental health and in my professional world, I was involved in professional development programs, which I run on behalf of organisations and one company in particular. When I was there for about 20 years, in fact, they put me through, well, I started off with a business degree and completed a major on human resource management and relevant background studies. And then I looked at what was coming and it was all about computers and accounting, which I really didn't want to do. So

I switched to a graduate diploma in counselling, which the company also sponsored because at the time I was involved in coaching people in career development and similar things. So that sort of brought me into this whole idea of counselling. And I stress at the outset; I'm not a psychologist nor a psychiatrist. But I started to realize that there's a lot of work to be done in helping people get the right way of thinking about, including in my own thinking, about how we think about God and the Lord Jesus Christ in particular and our life in Christ. And so I then started to look at the scriptures to see whether the scriptures, in fact, had good advice for us on how to think. And I believe that it does. And I believe that by nature we... don't think very well in many aspects of our life.

Stephen:

Well, the tagline of the four talks is, discover the powerful connection between biblical wisdom and mental well-being in this transformative four-part series by Gary Steele. Backed by Science and Scripture, these studies explore how the Bible can reduce stress, boost resilience and promote a healthier mind. Perfect for anyone seeking peace, purpose, and positivity through faith-based insights. Don't miss out, watch out. Subscribe and share to unlock the secrets of mental health through God's word. So no small task there, that's for sure.

Gary:

That's right, I didn't write that. But nevertheless, I think it's basically true. I think the Bible can help us think better than we naturally do. For example, in my research in the secular world, I came across a man named Martin Seligman, who was a psychologist who in his work discovered that 70% of the Western world at least had what's called or what he called a negative explanatory style. That is to say, when they look at the experience of their life, they tend to be somewhat pessimistic. And he wrote a couple of books on this subject. And I was fascinated by this because I thought I was the only one in the world who regularly self-deprecated and when anything went wrong, said, I knew this would happen. This always happens to me. I'm just a loser. And that was a refrain through my life. But interesting thing about that is that although many of us think that way, most of us don't think that way all the time. It's a fallback position often when things go wrong. But I believe over time, it lays down a foundation of thinking that's just not quite right. Now, Christadelphians don't believe in the supernatural devil. We believe that the devil is human nature. And so I like to liken this negative explanatory style to human nature. It's our flawed thinking. Going back to Adam and Eve, if you like, and coming down through time, we have this in a negative explanatory style about our world that pops up from time to time, but in some people is active most of the time. A very pessimistic kind of outlook.

Stephen:

Can I ask you how you then sort of put together the idea that we are to be humble and so not proud if you like? So what's the difference between having not a... not a negative view of yourself, but also not being proud.

Gary:

Okay, and I think that's the bit we all struggle with, you see, because I tend to, even though I know this, I tend to still associate a negative explanatory style with humility. But humility is really something you do. Like the Lord demonstrated humility when he washed the disciples' feet, that was humility. You know, being believing you're a very humble person.

Stephen:

Yeah.

Gary:

Not very humble, is it? So, I think we've got to be clear about this. The Apostle Paul, and I think he has the answer to this, the Apostle Paul encourages us to have a sound mind. Now, in Thessalonians, he talks about people having a feeble mind. In other parts, he talks about having a high mind. So, the feeble mind, you know, the Greek word there

for the feeble mind is small-souled person. Someone who doesn't have a lot of confidence, someone who has a classic negative explanatory style, if you like. A high-minded person, well, that speaks for itself. It's proud and it's overly confident and the confidence is not well placed, whereas a sound mind thinks soberly. And so if you follow the theme of a sound mind in Paul's writings, you see that it's a mind that is confident in Christ. It's confident in Christ. That's the key.

Stephen:

He's like boasting Christ, doesn't he?

Gary:

That's right.

Stephen:

My mind goes to the children of Israel, who, after the 10 unfaithful spies brought back their unfaithful report, said, oh, you know, we can't take the land. And, you know, you say, well, they're just being humble, but actually they're being unfaithful. So there's a big difference between humility and faithfulness. They're not the same thing and they're not opposites.

Gary:

No, that's right. That's right. So that's what got me going on this subject originally when I started to see what I was teaching people in the secular world about how they should challenge their negative explanatory style about themselves. Then I started to say, well, hang on, we do that religiously as well. I think many many Christians, Christadelphians included, don't have a lot of confidence in salvation when it really comes down to it. And to confess confidence in salvation is to be proud and not humble, as you say. So it's a very fine line, but I think it's an important line. Otherwise, Paul goes to some length in Galatians to say, do not frustrate the grace of God. That was the context in which people were trying to save themselves by keeping works of the law. And Paul's saying, you're really just frustrated with God. And that word frustrating there, and I haven't pursued this to make sure I'm absolutely right here, but it was pointed out to me recently that that word frustrate can also be translated reject. you reject the grace of God by trying to save yourself.

Stephen:

Certainly, fits in with the context of Galatians, that's for sure. Much of what we're talking about right now looks like it fits in with the first of the talks. Let me just outline the four-part series. The first talk is called *As He Thinks He Is*. That resonated with me in terms of being a scriptural quote. I did have to look this one up, I confess, and it looks like, and we'll talk about it in a sec, but it looks like it comes from Proverbs 23:7. for as he thinketh in his heart so he is. So we'll come back to that. The second talk is *Take No Anxious Thought*. So certainly, that resonated from the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching of our Lord. The third one is *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, obviously from David's beautiful Psalm 23. And the final one is... *This Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, which is Paul's words from, I think it's 2 Corinthians. So let's go back to the first of the talks and tell us a little bit about what you're talking about in the first talk, which is entitled *As he Thinks he is*.

Gary:

Okay, so, As a man thinketh things hard, so is he. Now, that's been extracted from the Proverbs by many motivational speakers down through time. But I think it's sound, what they're saying, Solomon is saying is, you do become your thoughts. So if you have a particularly negative view of yourself, then you'll live it and you'll behave in it and you'll actually seek for reinforcement that you're a horrible person. And this goes into a whole other area, but it's nevertheless true. And we will look for reinforcement of the self-perception we have amongst our friends. So you often see this with teenagers going through a phase of life where they're, you know, things aren't going so well for

them and they'll act out and they accept the pushback they get as a reward. You know, so as he thinks he is, is basically you need to think carefully about how you think about yourself because it's gonna manifest itself. in your life in some way. So that first talk is basically about that and other matters related to that and finally bringing it to a scriptural consideration of a sound mind. So that's the first talk.

Stephen:

As I'm listening to you speak, I'm thinking about the me generation who have had this, well, as they say, constant positive affirmation, no pushback. How do we reconcile the message that you're giving us right now with the reality of life, I guess you could say.

Gary:

That's an interesting one, Steve, because I would say that the, and there's a book written on this, just published not so long ago, I would say that the main generation is probably one of the most insecure. whoever walked the planet. I think the constant need for reinforcement likes, I've got to have likes on this picture. And we talk about this in the first talk, actually, this constant desire to get likes and counting likes versus somebody else's likes leading to actual mental health issues. And I have a quote on there from a writer on this subject saying, the more sites you actually access on your phone or your device, the greater your chances of developing poor mental health. is. So the me generation, I think, and they become the anxiety that they produce, and it acts out. So I don't see any conflict there. I don't think the me generation is as confident as their Instagram suggests.

Stephen:

Really interesting. Okay, we'll definitely be worth checking out the first study to get some more on that. The second one is take no anxious thought, the words from our Lord from the Sermon on the Mount.

Gary:

Yeah, so in this particular episode, what we're looking at is some definitions around anxiety. The mental health, I make a distinction between poor health and mental illness. The opposite of good mental health is not mental illness. The opposite of good mental health is poor mental health. Think of it like fitness. You can be physically fit or you're not physically fit. Your physical fitness is poor. It doesn't make you ill. And one of the things that we've got caught up in in the last few years is fighting to make the distinction between someone who is in poor mental health versus someone who is mentally ill. So someone can be suffering from anxiety at a manageable level without requiring medication or any particular. Just a bit of as required, a bit of exercise in the mind in the right way can get us back to good mental health. But unfortunately, the tendency is to reach for medication of some kind. Now there is undoubtedly some people who have what's called a general anxiety disorder. And these folk wake up in the morning anxious, they don't need any external stimulation, they just wake up. I do stress that the talk giving and not a treatment, I'm not recommending a treatment, I'm just sharing some thoughts from the scriptures about how you can help your mental health. So someone who has what's called GAD, a general anxiety disorder, they need probably to see a physician about it. But everyone has their own area of anxiety. So we're talking about everyday anxiety that's most often produced by the circumstances of life and learning how to manage that. And that's what we talk about in that session. Likewise for the session after that, which is on depression. Again, we go through the symptoms, we talk about the causes. We talk about what to make it worse, and we talk about some of the scriptural passages that can help challenge thinking and help you get your thinking back on track again. But again, there's a big difference between someone who has the occasional bad mood, the occasional depressive episode, compared to someone who has a major depressive illness, a classic depressive illness, and they would need other help outside of what I'm talking about?

Stephen:

Yeah, I think your distinction is helpful. So thank you.

Gary:

I call it the shadow of death because the value of the shadow of death because it can become. Okay, so finally, when the final talk, which is we have this treasure in earth and vessels, that's bringing together all the Bible helps on how we can improve our mental health. Now we talk about reframing, like the Apostle Paul talks about reframing. We talk about challenging thinking and so on. But rather than go through a whole list of techniques that anyone can find on the net, like mindfulness or cognitive behavioural therapy or any other number of excellent tools you can use, in the final talk, I decided to case study as someone whose life was extremely difficult. and to see how they managed it. And I chose the Apostle Paul for that because the Apostle Paul, more than any other character in the Bible, reveals to us his thinking and his circumstances and what he went through in life. It's really quite unique and it's a tremendous gift that we have the Apostle Paul's life there. So what we're looking at there is what was the mindset of the Apostle Paul that enabled him to endure the things he suffered? And of course, in a moment of what he calls foolishness, he reveals to us some of the things he suffered, like 3 shipwrecks, like floating around a day in the night in the deep, like being thrashed five times. 40 stripes side one. Look, it's just guys, that's terrible.

Stephen:

You sort of get the impression that he's really reluctant to say it.

Gary:

That's right. He doesn't want to tell us. He doesn't want to tell us because he's kind of embarrassed about it.

Stephen:

Yes.

Gary:

But it's shocking, you know, because in addition to the physical punishments that he experienced at the hands of so-called authorities, he also had to deal with the fact that around the world at the time, the Christian world at the time, he was being described as a robber, as an illegitimate apostle of someone who should not be listened to. The Corinthians said his bodily presence was contemptible and his speech like manner. I mean, this is terrible. And I just asked the audience, where would we pull the plug if we had to deal with that? If I got trash once, for the stripes I've won. I'd be thinking seriously about my career choice, whether this is how I wanted to live my life, but he pushed through all of that. So how did he do it? And he did it because of a particular mindset. And that mindset was that no matter what happened to him, he would count every form of suffering as an actual source of joy because it was making him a better person and it was leading him to the kingdom of God. So the things that come out in Paul's life very powerfully, His goal focus and having a goal is really one that will help any form of mental ill health. You get yourself through it by having a goal. When someone is suppressed, what they really feel like doing is curling up in a fetal position in the dark room and sleeping it off, which makes it worse when what they need is sunshine and exercise. Someone who is particularly anxious keeps worrying about what tomorrow is going to bring. which is why the Lord says, take no anxious thought, might just focus on today, just get through today, and so on. So the Apostle Paul had this mindset of glorying and suffering.

Stephen:

I resonate with what you're saying, because I often think of Paul and Silas in the prison singing hymns. It just seems to be the sort of the ultimate description of how they viewed life. So, it's not just a modification or they're slightly different in the way they think. It's just a completely different mindset. Like it's a quantum change. It's a completely new way of thinking. It's not just a modification of something that comes naturally.

Gary:

That's right. And so the Apostle Paul encourages us to develop the same mindset. And it starts with stress. So all deteriorations in mental start with stress in a general sense. So, the stress around COVID generated anxiety. Anxiety in turn generates, not in every case, but in many cases depression. Depression in many cases can come to all forms of self-harm and so on. But it all basically starts with how we handle stress. And so, the Apostle Paul converted what we call distress into eustress. So eustress is the kind of stress you feel when you if you're of this mind, throwing yourself off a cliff with a bungee rope. That's stressful, but people like doing it. Distress is something that comes on you from outside over which you've got no control. So it's managing the distress that will lead to the anxiety, which will lead to depression that the Apostle Paul mastered and the Lord Jesus Christ mastered as well. And so the final talk really goes into the Paul's life and all the verses that support that. And the thought is, I will be better for getting through this. I'll be a better person. Now, some would undoubtedly argue that there's a difference between poor mental health and dealing with being beaten up. You've got more power of choice over what's happening to you when you're beaten up as the apostle Paul was. How do you do that to your own brain that is letting you down, that's feeling anxiety and feeling depression? I think you can. I mean, when you go along to a therapist, they'll use cognitive behavioural therapy on you, which is basically doing what the Apostle Paul did. I'm cast down but not destroyed. You know, in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, he just keeps reframing all his experiences. And I think when you're feeling anxious, or you're feeling depressed or pulled down, you have to take some action. And then you have to challenge how you're thinking about what's going on for you.

Stephen:

Well, it all sounds really interesting. So, you've made me enthusiastic about the videos. I'll definitely be checking them out myself. So again, they're available on christadelphianvideo.org, available on YouTube and particularly the website. And for those who want the Christadelphian only videos, you can go and log on, get a password and log on. And there's an enormous number of videos in there. In fact, recently on Wilderness Conversations, we did an interview regarding Christadelphian Video Network and also check out some of the wilderness conversations we've already had with Gary on other subjects. Some of them are a little bit like these and we really appreciate your time, Gary. Thank you.