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BIBLICAL PERSONALITIES AND TRAUMA:  
TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF WELLBEING

Missions & Intercultural Studies

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Presented at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies

**Introduction**

Since Adam and Eve sinned in paradise, humanity has suffered. Today, newspapers and television proclaim humankind's suffering trauma from natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes); however, the majority of traumatic events comes from social and economic exploitation (e.g. war, disease, poverty, pestilences, and famine) (Heubach 1980, 5-7; Farmer 2005, 42-50.). C.S. Lewis, in his thesis *The Problem of Pain*, states that human history "is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just sufficient happiness interposed to give them (the victim), while it lasts, an agonized apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering" (1962, 14.).

Human beings cannot exist without pain and suffering, and there could be no life with its omission (Lewis 1962; van der Poel 1999, 35). Nevertheless, people rail against the seemingly injustice of suffering. They point to God claiming that a just God would not allow traumatic events that cause suffering. Lewis writes: "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both. This is the problem of pain in its simplest form" (1962, 26).

This problem of pain and suffering caused theologians throughout history to question how a good God could allow people to suffer. Yet God, through biblical stories, provided people

clues to not only how to survive traumatic events, but also how to move from suffering to well-being. Noah built an ark, per God's instruction, and then witnessed the total destruction of the world. Moses murders a man, wanders in the desert, and through him, God sends many natural disasters to force Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery. Sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph overcame betrayal, abuse, and imprisonment to become second in command in Egypt. Daniel lived through captivity, slavery, and near death from hungry lions. These biblical characters and many others lived through multiple traumatic events, preserved, and in many ways thrived. This paper will examine and define the terms trauma and well-being; it will study the traumatic events witnessed by three biblical personalities, David, Naomi, and Paul, to determine how they coped with the suffering they endured, and from these clues start the process of determining a biblical theology of well-being.

### **Trauma Defined**

Trauma involves a sudden and life-threatening event, which produces painful memories that overwhelms one's ability to cope (Figley and Figley 2009, 173). Traumatic events can destroy a person's trust in the world, other people, and even his or her identity (Bonanno et al. 2011, 117; Grant 1995, 73). Trauma does not go away. Its memory alters the course of the individual's life and how he or she interacts with family and society (Rambo 2010, 2; Wise 2007, 1-3). The way a person perceives and stories the traumatic event determines his or her role as a casualty or survivor (Jobson and O'Kearney 2008, 96).

Types and degrees of trauma vary from single-blow to repeated events. Car accidents, fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, burglary, rape, or homicide constitute a single-blow trauma. Repeated trauma comprises war, or sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Allen 1995, 7; Figley 1989, 7). Trauma can also be classified into two other categories, natural trauma and man-made

trauma. Natural trauma can be witnessed in “acts of God,” earthquakes, tornadoes, avalanches, floods, fires, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions. A person’s reaction to this one time crisis depends on the extent of exposure to the event. Man-made trauma can include violent crimes, traffic accidents, war, political violence, domestic violence, and child abuse (Allen 1995, 13-16). Trauma can also be defined in terms of physical (body injury), psychological (an incident that causes strong emotional reactions), social (oppressive social conditions e.g.: war, poverty, discrimination, violence), historical (past personal or social violence), ongoing (daily violence), and vicarious or secondary trauma (experienced by mental health helpers called compassion fatigue) (Wise 2007, 3-4). Contact with profound traumatic incidents can produce an immediate and long-term (up to two generations) negative impact on the person, the family, and the society (Dybdahl 2006, 134).

Prolonged and repeated traumatic events seem to cause more serious psychiatric disorders in the victims. The severity of the effect of trauma does not just depend on the amount of trauma experienced. Traumatic factors such as type and context remain imperative to negative pathology. Trauma not only affects human beings socially, emotionally, and physically, it affects their spirituality. It can either promote spiritual well-being or decay (Kusner and Pargament 2012, 220).

### **Well-Being and Coping Defined**

A person needs good coping skills to have a sense of well-being and overcome trauma. To ascertain a scriptural base for well-being, one needs to define this emotional state. An understanding of coping will also be explored so that it can be applied to biblical characters.

## Well-Being

Most agree the definition of well-being includes a person having positive emotions such as happiness or contentment, the lack of negative emotions like fear and depression, and satisfaction with life (Prevention 2014). David Myers states, “Well-being outlasts yesterday’s moment of elation, today’s buoyant mood, and tomorrow’s hard time; it is an ongoing perception that this time of one’s life, or even life as a whole, is fulfilling, meaningful, and pleasant” (1992, 23-24). A person who has well-being has an abiding sense that no matter the crisis or trauma, all will be well (Myers 1992, 24). Another aspect of well-being is the psychological term resilience.

Resilience offers the power to recover quickly from crisis and trauma and relies on contextually dependent resolution of tensions encountered across cultures and contexts (Pulley and Wakefield 2001, 7; Ungar et al. 2007, 288). George Bonanno and Anthony Mancini define resilience as “the ability ... to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning ... as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions” (2006, 42). Outcomes differ depending on the individual’s personality and his or her relational, communal, cultural, and contextual factors (Ungar et al. 2007, 307). Resilient people also express hardiness in the face of trauma.

Hardiness allows a person to take the crisis elements and, with control and commitment, have the ability to find meaning, personal development, purpose, and the belief that he or she has the power to change the outcome (Arndersson Arnten et al. 2008, 140-141; Eschleman et al. 2010, 278). A person’s hardiness also becomes an imperative aspect in how he or she deals with stress and trauma. Personality traits such as good/bad self-esteem, flexibility/rigidity, tolerance for ambiguity, and/or introversion/extroversion also factor into hardiness (Quick et al. 1990, 41).

With the above definitions, the terms well-being, resilience, and hardiness can be interchanged to describe a person who can cope with trauma in a healthy way.

### Coping

Coping is “the ongoing transactional process between (a person’s) environment, a process impacted by both cognitive appraisal and coping behavior” (Maynard et al. 2001, 65). Coping involves various ways, behavioral and emotional and unique to the individual and the situation, to manage stress and trauma (Bonanno et al. 2011, 118; Hambrick and McCord 2010, 69; Tan 2000, 162). Kenneth Pargament and his colleagues define three types of coping skills used by people in crisis. The first involves a self-directing style where the person actively solves the problem on his or her own. Second, the deferring style is where one gives the problem in its entirety to God. Third, the collaborative style involves the individual and God working together in the problem solving process (Pargament et al. 1988). Turning to God may be the first crisis response for many; yet a person’s positive or negative personality also determines how he or she manages anxiety.

Coping ability relies not only on how people sense a traumatic event, but also their internal and external resources which define their vulnerability (Balswick and Balswick 1997, 34-36). Internal negative dispositions tend to recognize little control in a crisis situation and thereby exacerbating fear and anxiety (Pargament et al. 1992, 505; Schottenbauer et al. 2006, 500). On the other hand, internal positive dispositions aid a person in a traumatic situation. A positive attitude allows change, wants to learn, and has a sense of identity and purpose (Pulley and Wakefield 2001, 10-21). Being positive reduces negative psychological emotions (Schottenbauer et al. 2006, 500). External resources include assistance from friends, family, and

society and physical and monetary resources (Balswick and Balswick 1997, 201; Greeff and Wentworth 2009, 312; Taylor et al. 2004, 355).

In extreme uncontrollable situations, most people turn toward spiritual or religious power to help with their coping (Banziger et al. 2008, 102; Pargament et al. 1988, 91). Spiritual coping can have a negative or positive aspect. Negative coping manifests in one's spiritual disposition. This negative spiritual coping mirrors the spiritual pain, struggle, frustration, and turmoil of a person's response to traumatic events (Kusner and Pargament 2012, 217). People cope negatively when they believe that God is punishing or abandoning them; when they put all blame on the devil; if they walk away, withdraw, or question God; if they lash out at God; or ask God for revenge (Kusner and Pargament 2012, 218). Spiritually positive coping skills include: drawing closer to and working with God; believing he or she has God given guidance, support, and life purpose; praying for others; seeking spiritual support from faith communities; and asking God and others for forgiveness (Kusner and Pargament 2012, 217).

With the understanding of trauma, well-being, and coping skills as a foundation, a tentative theology of well-being can be built by looking at the lives of biblical characters who survived traumatic events. Three lives will be observed to determine the extent of their trauma and how they coped. These three personalities include King David, Naomi, and the Apostle Paul.

### **King David**

David, one of the most well-known and beloved kings of Israel, helped Christians through the ages deal with pain and suffering with his songs, written in the book of Psalms. Considered a man after God's own heart, David always looked to Yahweh when faced with traumatic experiences. One finds the key to David's life of well-being in these songs.

## David's Traumatic Life

The prophet Samuel introduces David when God tells him to anoint this teenage boy with oil because the young man will be the next king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:12). As a shepherd, David faced natural dangers from lions and bears that tried to devour his sheep (1 Sam, 17:37). Man-made trauma permeated his life. He fought many battles, starting with his encounter with the Philistine giant Goliath. This large warrior had the whole Israelite army so afraid that no seasoned soldier volunteered to answer his challenge (1 Sam. 17:24). David fought in many battles throughout his life: civil wars between Israel and Judah and external wars with the Philistines and the Amalekites.

David endured prolonged and repeated traumatic events in his association with King Saul. According to Louise Slavicek, King Saul suffered from mental illness, blaming his mood swings on evil spirits (2009, 32). David playing his harp and singing seemed to be the only thing that soothed the king's troubled soul. However, after David's triumph over Goliath, jealousy overcame King Saul and he tried numerous times to kill David with his spear (1 Sam. 18:10-11). When this did not work, the insane King Saul promoted David to commander of a thousand and sent him off to war with the Philistines hoping that he would die in battle (1 Sam. 18:17). After the King allowed his daughter to marry David, he hatched a plot to ambush and kill David when he left his home (1 Sam. 19:11-14). This forced David to live in exile with the King repeatedly trying to kill him (1 Sam. 23:14-15).

David suffered personal tragedy in his life. King Saul forced his first wife to marry another man during David's exile (1 Sam. 25:43-44). The Amalekites captured all the women and children of his army including his two wives. After a great demonstration of grief, his men turned on him and wanted to stone him (1 Sam. 30:1-6). He lost his infant son with Bathsheba (2



Sam. 12:15-18). His son Amnon raped his daughter Tamar, which led to his son Absalom killing Amnon for his despicable deed (2 Sam. 13). Absalom later led a rebellion against his father and soldiers killed him in the fight (2 Sam. 18). David was so distraught over his son's death that he would not quit his mourning to welcome back his victorious army (2 Sam. 19:6-9). With all of these traumatic events, one would think that David would be a psychological mess. Yet, David seemed to overcome each one with resilience and well-being.

### David's Coping Style

In the book of Psalms, David poured his heart into the songs allowing the reader to feel his raw emotions over the events in his life. Patterns emerge on how he coped with each trauma. The themes of David's coping style include: praise/worship, asking for help, working with God, and trusting in God.

#### *Praise and Worship*

In times of trouble, David often starts his songs with praise and worship to God. During David's years of hiding from Saul, he praises the Lord, crying out his love for the God who saves (Ps. 18:1-3). He declares the importance of worship and seeks God in His temple in the midst of danger (Ps. 27: 4). He sings praises of God's faithfulness to all who will listen (Ps. 57:9-10). David fought valiantly in many battles. He even had to feign madness to keep from being captured by Abimelech. One again David opens his song with praise, proclaiming that when a person worships God, it "opens the doors to all his goodness" (Ps. 34:9, The Message). He praises God, hungering and thirsting for more of Him as he crosses the desert (Ps. 63:1-8). David calls out to God asking for mercy. He tells God all his complaints and troubles (Ps. 142: 1-2). He praised God for all the promises He fulfilled (Ps. 56: 12-13).

After the prophet Nathan told David that his infant son by Bathsheba would die because of his sin, David fasted and prayed desperately for mercy, sleeping on the floor and not leaving the palace. He was so distraught that his servants feared to tell him of the child's death. However, upon hearing the horrible news, David "got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped" (2 Sam. 12:20)<sup>1</sup>. David understood the power of worship and praise in the face of adversity to raise his spirit and bring hope.

### *Asking for Help*

David never fears requesting God's assistance. While on the run from Saul he cries for help in times of trouble and God hears him (Ps. 18:6). When David calls out, God "saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps. 34:6). David tells others to never hide their feelings from God, that He sends His angels to surround and protects those who ask (Ps. 34:6-7). If one cries for help, "the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles" (Ps. 34:17). God watches and listens attentively to every cry from the righteous (Ps. 34:15). In Psalms David once again calls out to God to rescue him from his enemies (v1). It is a fourfold cry for assistance to "deliver, protect, deliver, save" (Waltner 2006, 291). Martyrs through the ages have quoted Psalms 34, believing with David that God heard their prayers and even in their darkest hours they trusted in the Lord's liberation (Waltner 2006, 183).

David wrote Psalms three about his flight from his son Absalom. During this traumatic event David turns to God stating, "... with all my might I shout up to God, His answers thunder from the holy mountain ... Up, God! My God, help me! Slap their faces ... Real help comes from God. Your blessing clothes your people!" (Ps. 3:3-8, The Message). When everything seems to

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

be going wrong, prayer begins with a cry for help. Then God answers the human call and goes into action to defend His people and they can hold their heads high with hope. When God stands by a person's side he or she can face whatever comes (Waltner 2006, 42).

### *Working with God*

David had a working relationship with Yahweh and always believed God would deliver him. When David stood in front of Goliath he said, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands" (1 Sam.17: 45-46a). David knew God fought by his side when the enemy attacked (Ps.18: 16-19). He discerned God controlled and directed his life (Ps. 18:30). God met David "more than halfway" and freed him from his "anxious fears" (Ps. 34:4, The Message). Even in his deepest despair, David ran to God who protected and delivered him (Ps. 57:1-3). During the toughest times, he moved closer so he could "live and breathe God" (Ps. 34: 2, The Message).

David wrote Psalms 27 in the midst of trouble. Yet, in spite of his difficulties he realized God stood by his side. David questions, "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (v. 1). David claim's "Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident" (v. 3). He looks at the past and realizes God's faithfulness (v. 9-10) and he tells himself to "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (v. 14). With God by his side, David knew no trauma could defeat him or disturb his well-being.

### *Trusting in God*

One of the major themes of David's Psalms is trust. Trust produces hope in all of David's traumatic circumstances (Theodoret 2000, 324). James Waltner states, "Fear is the common

reaction in the face of insecurity and whatever threatens life. However, the psalmist is not overcome by fear; instead, he overcomes his fear by trust in God. Trust in God robs fear of its quality of terror” (2006, 280).

When the Amalekites took the wives and children of David’s army captive and his men wanted to kill him, David “strengthened himself with trust in his God” (1 Sam. 30:6b, The Message). During David’s enslavement by the Philistines, he put his trust in God (Ps. 56:1-5). While he hid from King Saul he trusted in the Lord and remain confident that God would deliver him (Ps.63: 9-11). He trusted that the Lord would never let him down. In Psalms 34 he writes, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all” (vs. 18-19).

In Psalms 147 3-7 one can sense David’s desperation. The strain of being hated and hunted by Saul permeates every word. David sees no way out; he has no one to turn too except for the Lord. The Lord is his last chance, his only hope. Then in the last verse, David looks to the future with confidence that the good Lord will deliver. When King Saul lays in wait outside David’s house to kill him, David proclaims God’s dependability stating that he can count on the Lord and because of this steadfast love he can sing in the midst of danger (Ps. 59: 10, 17).

King David lived a life of joy, sadness, adventure, and trauma. However, through the ups and down’s, he managed to sing songs of praise and worship to a God who would deliver him. He coped well and maintained a sense of well-being throughout his life.

### **Naomi**

Naomi’s life seems to get lost in the story of Ruth and Boaz. However, the trauma in Naomi’s life created the circumstances that brought Ruth to the country of Israel to marry Boaz and become the great grandmother of King David, and therefore in the family tree of Jesus. The

author of the book of Ruth paints Naomi as a woman whose faith in God endured through compounded tragedy (Roop 2002, 16).

### Naomi's Traumatic Life

Naomi's story starts with a natural traumatic event. Famine gripped the land of Israel. So scarce is the food that Elimelech from Bethlehem packed up his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion and went to the country of Moab to start again (Ruth 1:1). This transition made the family resident aliens, causing the family to be vulnerable to the "social and economic system controlled by native residents" (Roop 2002, 29). Then personal tragedy strikes, Elimelech dies (Ruth 1:3). This forces Naomi to fend for her sons in a foreign land. The sons marry two Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:4). Ten years later, Mahlon and Chilion die, leaving their wives childless (Ruth 1:5). Once again, Naomi finds herself and her daughter-in-laws in danger, they are women, without family, in a foreign land, deprived of a way to earn a living (Roop 2002, 30). Grief stricken and hearing that the famine ended, Naomi decides to return to Judah. She starts the journey with both daughter-in-laws, but only Ruth stays with her to the end. So great was the trauma of Naomi that when the people of her hometown of Bethlehem saw her they asked, "Can this be Naomi?" (v. 21). Naomi (meaning pleasant, delightful, or happy) countered their query by stating her new name, Mara (meaning bitter). Naomi believed God had sent her the trauma she went through because she said, "The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (v. 21). Jewish and Christian interpretative tradition also presumes that divine retribution killed the men: "Elimelech for taking his family to such a disreputable country, and Mahlon and Chilion for marrying foreign women" (Roop 2002, 30). Regardless of the reason, Naomi felt real pain and betrayal by God as her world turned from "pleasant to bitter" (Roop 2002, 17).

### Naomi's Coping Style

When examining the way Naomi survived the trauma she endured, one encounters more negative than positive coping techniques. She used negative coping when she alleged God continued to punish her for sins of the past and she employed a self-directing style by deciding to take control and fix the problem ( Kusner and Pargament 2012, 218; Pargament et al. 1988, 91). Naomi utilized a positive coping skill when she allowed community to speak into her life.

#### *Punishment by God*

Throughout the first few chapters of Ruth, Naomi blames God for her trouble. She tells her daughter-in-laws, “It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!” (1:13b). Instead of praise and thanksgiving, Naomi complains, “the Strong One ruined me” (1:21, The Message) (Roop 2002, 41). People do not like to suffer and seemingly unwarranted trauma can make them angry. People want to find a cause for disaster often blaming Satan, sin, luck, or fate. They need to permit themselves to vent their rage at God, thereby allowing their spirit to heal (Roop 2002, 42). Even though she seems to be spiraling down toward negative pathology, in the end she acknowledges God’s hand in her situation when she says, “God hasn’t quite walked out on us after all! He still loves us, in bad times as well as good!” (2:20, The Message).

#### *Self-Directing Style*

Naomi started to search for a solution to her and Ruth’s problem. They needed food and so Naomi looked to her husband’s wealthy kinsman Boaz (2:1). She sent Ruth out to glean this kinsman’s fields (2:2-3). Boaz terminated the food situation when he told Ruth to only glean in his fields. He instructed his workmen to not harass her and to leave extra grain for her to gather (2:11-17). However, to secure a future home and security, Naomi encourages Ruth to seduce

Boaz on the threshing floor (3:7). It may be that Naomi, tired of waiting for Boaz to do his duty by becoming their kinsman redeemer, went outside the social mores. Her plan worked and Boaz purchased the inheritance of Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon and married Ruth (4:5-13). Even though Naomi seems to rectify the situation herself, when Boaz and Ruth have a son, Naomi acknowledges the hand of God in redeeming her trauma. He restored fertility first to Israel (1:6, 22) and then to Naomi's family (4:13).

### *Community Assistance*

When disaster strikes and it seems that God is silent, the assistance of family, friends, and community helps the sufferer endure (Roop 2002, 41). When Naomi returned from Moab, her hometown community seemed to embrace her, not reject her (1:18). Her extended family allowed her to send Ruth to glean the fields and even provided extra food for her table (2:15-16). Ruth proclaimed, "Oh sir, such grace, such kindness—I don't deserve it. You've touched my heart and treated me like one of your own. And I don't even belong here" (2:13, *The Message*). The community surrounds Naomi after the birth of her grandson. The women of Bethlehem give thanks to God on behalf of Naomi for His provision (4:14-15). With this grandson, Naomi will never be hungry or childless again and this baby boy completes her joy (4:14-16) (Roop 2002, 83).

Naomi may have exercised a few negative coping skills but she did not remain bitter. She blamed God for her trauma, yet in the end she praised Him for not forsaking her. She tried to improve her situation using questionable means, yet realized that God redeemed her plan. Naomi did not isolate herself after the devastation of losing her husband and sons; she allowed her community and family to embrace her during the hard times and rejoice with her in the good.

## **The Apostle Paul**

The first recorded missionary of the gospel, the Apostle Paul, dealt with many obstacles during his missionary service. Paul boasts of being overworked, imprisoned, sleep deprived, and starved. He lacked adequate clothing, faced harsh physical elements, and had near-death experiences from beatings, stoning, robberies, and shipwrecks. Paul received threats from believers and non-believers alike (2 Cor. 11:23-29).

### Paul's Traumatic Life

Before his conversion, Saul (Paul) caused and witnessed many stonings of early leaders and members. The first recorded was Stephen's death (Acts 7:58). Then Saul persecuted the fledgling church (Acts 8:3). Even though Saul instigated these traumatic events, the secondary trauma can cause negative emotional pathology (Figley and Figley 2009, 173-174).

Saul's also experienced a traumatic conversion to Christ. A blinding light made him fall to the ground and the God of the Church he persecuted spoke to him in an audible voice. The incident left him blind for three days (Acts 9:3-9). Saul became Paul and the tide of persecution turned toward him.

Paul lived through numerous, recurring traumatic events. He had to flee many cities when he learned about death threats on his life (Antioch in Pisidian: Acts 13:50-51; Loconium: 14:2, 5-6, Lystra: 14:19; Thessalonica 17:5-9; Berea: 17:13-14; Corinth: 18:6; Achaia 18:12-17; Caesarea: 21:27-36; and Jerusalem: 23:12-25). The community of Lystra stoned him (Acts 14:19). After healing a demonic girl in Philippi, a mob attacked Paul and Silas, striped, beat, whipped, and threw them into prison (Acts 16:16-17). In Asia, one can hear Paul's desperation when he writes, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). In Macedonia, Paul encountered such church conflict that



“we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within” (2 Cor. 7:5). In Damascus, Paul had to crawl out a window in city wall, be let down in a basket, and then run for his life (2 Cor. 11:33). Paul went to Caesarea and then to his hometown of Tarsus because of threats against his life. It was during this time in his ministry that he endured his worst hardships (Giron 1997, 28).

Second Corinthians 11:23-28 is the longest single listing of the traumatic events Paul lived through (Adewuya 2011, 92):

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

According to this list, Paul endured every type of trauma imaginable.

Then, if this traumatic life style was not enough, Paul also dealt with a physical infirmity, “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” (2 Cor. 12:7). No one knows for sure what physical problem Paul had. Some speculate disabilities such as depression, failing eyesight, or epilepsy (Stourton 2005, 80). Even with all these traumatic events clouding Paul’s life, he not only coped well, he also encouraged the Church to follow his coping style.

#### Paul’s Coping Style:

Paul went through more traumatic events than most people endure in a lifetime. Yet Paul never seems discouraged or downhearted. He believed in the integral linkage of suffering and the message of the Gospel (Dunn 1998, 496). He used his stories as teaching tools to assist others in

their journey with Christ. Three themes stand out in Paul's ability to cope with tragedy: trusting in God, suffering and character growth, and call.

### *Trusting in God*

When one reads Paul's story, he or she senses Paul's strong trust in the Lord. While in a Philippian jail, Paul writes to the town's church: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). Even when physically shackled, his spirit rejoiced unfettered (Buechner 1991, 102-103). In the same jail, Paul and Silas "were praying and singing hymns to God" (Acts 16:25) just before an earthquake set them free. Paul pens to the church in Corinth that through hard times, "Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we are forced to trust God totally." (2 Cor. 1:10-11, *The Message*). The prayers of believers assist this trust as Paul states, "as you help us by your prayers" (2 Cor. 1:11). Paul knew that only through unreserved reliance on God and depending on the collective prayers of the Church could he successfully cope with each traumatic experience (Tucker and Andrews 1992, 25).

Trust allowed Paul to express emotions paradoxical to what usually accompanies trauma. He declares with trust in Christ he could be "hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-9); "beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing" (2 Cor. 6:9-10). As each traumatic event happened, Paul's trust in God grew (Sande 2004, 67-68).

### *Suffering and Character*

Another coping mechanism Paul utilized was viewing suffering as building his character, preparing him for heaven. "Therefore we do not lose heart. Through outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are

achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:16-17). Paul told the Corinthian church that his sufferings would not only result in their “comfort and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6) but by watching God assist them through hard times they could turn around and help others (2 Cor. 1:3-5). This character of service often comes through adversity.

Paul also realized that the “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7) he endured every day helped him keep in perspective God’s ability to make feebleness resilient. He states,

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Paul learned how to face trauma with perseverance and power. He acknowledged that trauma could not be avoided, so he needed to embrace it knowing that suffering would reveal God’s glory and Paul’s character would be refined (Clinton et al. 2005, 404).

### *Call*

Paul knew God called him on the road to Damascus to spread the Gospel to both the Jews and Gentiles (Acts 9). He would do whatever it took to convey the message of Jesus Christ to the lost of the world. At the center of Paul’s salvation message was the cross, the image of trauma, suffering, and death. With this imagery he declares that only through pain and sorrow can the power and glory of God be discovered and sanctification be achieved (Grenz 2000, 339; Hafemann 1990, 226; Jervis 2007, 119). Paul also felt as non-believers witnessed how Christians dealt with trauma they would be introduced to the Christ who assisted believers through each crisis (Grassi 2003, 106). Paul deemed trauma and anguish as a small price to pay for a life saved (Adewuya 2011, 90). Therefore, he connected his missionary calling with suffering.

Paul's love for Christ drove his life and ministry and he understood he shared in the sorrow of Christ with every traumatic event he lived through (Barnett 2008, 165; Roetzel 1999, 170). He makes no distinction between the distressing events brought on by ministry or personal suffering (his thorn in the flesh) (Hooker 1981, 80). He never asked "Why?" or tried to find a reason for his travail. He just encourages the churches to identify with the suffering Christ, and by staying positive and trusting in God's love find well-being (Adewuya 2011, 97; Jervis 2007, 65). For he states: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:35-37).

The trauma David, Naomi, and Paul encountered mirrors what people around the world go through today. Humanity still face natural traumas such as wild animal attacks, storms causing shipwrecks, earthquakes, and famine; man-made traumas like civil and foreign wars and robberies; prolonged and repeated trauma such as death threats, being beaten, imprisoned; and personal trauma like abuse, kidnapping, death of spouse and/or children, rape, hunger, sleep deprivation, physical impairments, and interpersonal conflicts. David, Naomi, and Paul's coping skills can be examined in light of today's coping research.

### **Today's Research and Biblical Coping**

Researchers such as Bonanno and Pargament have looked at how people achieve resilience and well-being in the aftermath of trauma. They examined human coping from a sociological, physical, emotional, and spiritual viewpoint. Their research is insightful and their results assist counselors in building positive coping skills in their clients. The Bible also provides people with a blueprint of how to live a life of well-being through its many stories and instructional letters. When one witnesses how these biblical personalities coped with trauma, he

or she realizes that they managed in many of the same ways discovered by today's researchers. They used Pargament's three coping styles, employed internal and external resources, and applied positive and negative coping skills.

### *Pargament's Coping Styles*

The three biblical personalities examined used all three of Pargament's (1988) coping styles. Naomi utilized the self-directing style when she went against social norms and asked Ruth to seduce Boaz. She did not seek God's guidance with the problem but actively tried to solve it on her own. David and Paul knew their limitations and often exercised the deferring coping style by giving their problems entirely to God. They both trusted God and knew that He alone would bring them through. David often applied the collaborative style, knowing that God worked with him through traumatic events (i.e. slaying of Goliath, killing wild animals, help in battle). He never feared asking for God's help when he faced trauma and crisis.

### *Internal and External Resources*

Jack Balswick and Judith Balswick expressed the need of a person's internal and external resources to help with their coping skills (1997, 34-36). Internal negative and positive dispositions assist or hurt a person's outlook of the tragedy. In Naomi's case, she seemed to have a negative disposition where she blamed God for her situation and changed her name from pleasant to bitter. David and Paul, on the other hand, seemed to have positive dispositions toward the trauma they faced. David sang songs of praise and worship to God when he faced times of difficulty. Paul instructed the church that the positive attitudes needed to assure human well-being were the fruit of the spirit: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23) (Ellsworth and Ellsworth 2010, 134). He lived his words as he faced each crisis.

Externally, David, Naomi, and Paul had positive support. David had a wonderful friendship with Jonathan, assistance from his mighty men, and from the prophets Samuel and Nathan. Naomi received care from her hometown community. They helped her and Ruth with food, comfort, and celebration at the birth of her grandson. Paul knew he could not survive his many tragedies without the prayers of the Church and the encouragement of Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Apollos, Aquila, Priscilla and a host of others who sustained him physically and emotionally.

### *Negative and Positive Coping Skills*

Katherine Kusner and Pargament studied negative and positive religious coping skills of people in crisis (2012, 217-218). These biblical characters also coped negatively and positively spiritually. Naomi dealt with her tragedy negatively. She blamed God and suspected He abandoned and wanted to punish her for the sin her family committed. She felt bitterness toward the God who put her in this tragic situation. David and Paul used positive spiritual coping in their adversity. They drew closer to God through each tragedy. Paul believed it shaped his character and made him more Christ-like. They both understood God called them, David to kingship and Paul to apostleship. They prayed for others and asked that others support them in prayer. They requested help from God and faith communities. David and Paul recognized that well-being could only be achieved with total surrender and trust in God.

King David, Naomi and Paul went through traumatic events. Each coped in different ways, but they all seemed to achieve well-being. From these three biblical personalities, the beginning of a theology of well-being can be extrapolated.

## **A Biblical Theology of Well-being**

To develop a sound biblical theology of well-being, more biblical characters must be examined. However, a start can be made from the lives of David, Naomi, and Paul. From these stories, a biblical pattern emerges which can assist humankind in developing a sense of well-being. This biblical coping style includes trust in God, praise and worship, a sense of purpose and teaching, and petitioning assistance from God and community.

### Trust in God

Both David and Paul spoke of their unwavering trust in God. David wrote about his trust in God through kidnappings, his capture and enslavement by the Philistines, and Saul hunting him. The word trust can be found 61 times in the Psalms (NIV). In relation to trauma, David writes: “To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame” (Ps. 22:5); “The Lord is my strength and my shield, my heart trusts in him” (Ps. 28:7); “When I was afraid, I put my trust in you” (Ps. 56:3); “... in God I trust and am not afraid” (Ps. 56:4); “in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps. 56:11); “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust” (Ps. 91:2); and, “They have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord” (Ps. 112:7). David knew to survive trauma he had to trust in God.

Paul also needed to trust God in his affliction. He had to “trust God totally” (2 Cor. 1:10, *The Message*) in a Corinthian jail. It was this trust in his Lord and Savior that helped him through being overworked, imprisoned, sleep deprived, starved, beat, stoned, robbed, shipwrecked. In spite of all his traumatic experiences he knew that only through trust could he find joy. He wrote to the Church, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him” (Rom. 15:13).

## Praise and Worship

David and Paul knew that praise and worship in the midst of trouble fostered hope and well-being. Every song David penned in the Psalms expressed praise to his God. As he runs from Saul he sings, “I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies” (Ps. 18:3). In the desert he writes, “Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you, your right hand upholds me” (Ps. 63: 7-8). During his Philistine captivity he pens, “In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise ... For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in light of life” (Ps. 56:10,13). David recognized that only through praise could he survive horrific experiences.

Paul also praised and worshiped God during traumatic times. After being stripped and beaten with rods, Paul and Silas found themselves in stocks in a Philippian jail. In the middle of the night, in this desperate situation, Paul and Silas “were praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25). He praised the “God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Paul, through praise, turned the tables on his emotions and persevered and rejoiced in the midst of trauma and uncertainty (2 Cor. 4:8-9; 6:8-10). Both David and Paul knew the act of praise and worship uplifted their spirits and thereby well-being would be obtained.

## A Sense of Purpose and Teaching

King David and the apostle Paul had a firm sense of purpose or call, which helped them survive trauma. They also viewed suffering as a tool God employed to teach and build a godly character. David knew God called him to be king of Israel as Samuel anointed him with oil (1 Sam. 16:12). Even though David knew he would be king he never coveted the position nor tried to take it before God gave it to him. As a result of this call, David experienced repeated trauma:



Saul tried to kill him, his first wife was taken away from him, his involvement in civil and foreign wars, and his son Absalom's attempted coup. Through it all, David knew God would deliver him to pursue his God ordained purpose. Paul also had a dramatic call that drove his passion to reach the lost at all cost (Acts 9). Paul perceived his suffering as part of his call, "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you ... I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness" (Col. 1:24, 25). It was this sense of call and purpose that gave a reason for each trial.

Not only did David and Paul recognize a purpose for trauma in their call, they also realized that suffering built character. After David sinned by having an affair with Bathsheba and murdering her husband he cried "create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). When oppressors surround him, he exclaims, "Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path: (Ps. 27:11). In the same breath as his liberation, David requests instruction, "Rescue me from my enemies, Lord for I hide myself in you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God" (Ps. 143:9-10). Paul also viewed suffering as character building. He told the Church that though they suffered outwardly, God continued to change them inwardly (2 Cor. 4:16-17). He states, "but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3-4). Paul experienced not only outward trauma, he also had a persistent physical infirmity. He asked for it to be taken away, but he later admitted that this weakness made him stronger (2 Cor. 12:9-10). A sense of well-being came to David and Paul as they surrendered their lives to God's plan and allowed themselves to be molded into Christlikeness through suffering.

### Petitioning Assistance from God and Community

Unafraid, David and Paul petitioned assistance from God and their community during demanding times. Throughout the Psalms David called out to God for help. When dealing with traumatic events he wrote, “In my distress I called to the Lord, I cried to my God for help” (Ps. 18:6) and “Help me Lord my God; save me according to your unfailing love” (Ps. 109:26). David knew he could not overcome adversity without the sustaining assistance of his heavenly Father.

Paul too realized he could not survive without God’s assistance. He testified to God’s aid at his defense in front of Agrippa (Acts 26:22); that God helped him present the Gospel even at great peril (1 Thess. 2:2). Paul taught that the Spirit helps the believer in his or her weakness (Rom. 8:26). He instructed the members of the Church that they needed to assist not only Paul with prayer and physical support (1 Cor. 16:6, 2 Cor. 1:11, 9:2), but also one another (1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 16:2, Eph. 4:29; Phil. 4:3), and the weak outside the Church (1 Thess. 5:14). Paul knew that only with the help of God and community could he make it through the tough times.

Community helped Naomi turn her bitterness into joy. Her hometown gathered around her and received her back into community (Ruth 1:18). They provided her and Ruth with food (Ruth 2:15-16). They also rejoiced with Naomi over the birth of her grandson, praising God for his faithfulness toward her (Ruth 4:14-15). Naomi seemed to cope negatively with the death of her husband and sons, yet Naomi achieved well-being because of her home community.

From just these three biblical personalities, a theology of well-being can be birthed. To retain a state of well-being during and after traumatic events one must strive to do several things. First, one must trust in God, believing in His control over the situation. As he or she realizes that God has never failed in the past, he or she will find a sense of security and peace. Second, one

must praise and worship the Trinity. Praise and worship changes a person's perspective and takes his or her eyes off the situation and places them on the One who has the power to defeat the problem. Third, one must realize that he or she has a purpose and that God intends to improve his or her temperament. Just like the heat of a furnace refines gold, so too suffering builds character. Fourth, to get through adversity, one should always petition assistance from God and community. Allowing family, friends, and other believers to help with traumatic situations relieves stress and brings about healing. Petitioning God for assistance places control back into the hands of the One who has the power to fix the problem. Only with God's aid can a person surmount the negative pathology resulting from trauma and move toward a life of well-being.

### **Conclusion**

Trauma and suffering will eventually touch each human life. This trauma can come in many forms, from a one-time holocaust to repeated blows. It can seem to originate from the hand of God or from humanity's evilness. Trauma can affect a person emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually. How a person copes with these events will determine his or her emotional negative pathology or well-being.

People who seem to overcome adversity are resilient or hardy. They do this by coping well through each traumatic situation. People manage by working on the problem alone, by working with God, or by giving the situation totally over to God. They can cope positively by allowing change, learning from the situation, having a sense of purpose, asking for help from God, family, friends, or community. Positive spiritual coping allows the person to draw closer and work with God, believe in a God given purpose and guidance, and rely on a faith community's support and prayers. Negative coping, on the other hand, produces fear and anxiety because of the loss of a sense of control. When a person copes in a spiritually negative way, he

or she perceives God's punishment or abandonment or questions God's goodness and lashes out at Him and others.

King David, Naomi, and the Apostle Paul all lived through many traumatic experiences. They survived death threats, kidnappings, wars, deaths of spouses and children, famine, shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, and personal conflict. Yet all three seemed to not only endure but also thrive. They utilized many of the coping skills that researchers detect human beings employ today. Yet from their stories, the beginnings of a biblical theology of well-being can be deduced. The key components of this biblical coping style include trust in God, praise and worship, a sense of purpose and teaching, and petitioning assistance from God and community. As people practice the components of this biblical theology of well-being, they will be better prepared to withstand the traumas life brings their way.

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