

# IS BIBLICAL COUNSELING FOR YOU?

BY TRICIA CLEMENT



If you picked up this article, you're probably hurting. You may be fighting your way through a fog of depression. You may find yourself growing more anxious each day. You may be divorced, isolated, angry, addicted, abused, or hopeless. You may have lost your health or your job or a loved one. You may feel all alone...

...But you are not alone. In fact, you are in good company: many others—your friends, neighbors, and acquaintances—are struggling too.

Consider these statistics from a typical year in the US:

- 16 million adults had a major depressive incident<sup>1</sup>
- 19% of adults struggled with an anxiety disorder<sup>2</sup>
- 137 million people visited the emergency room<sup>3</sup>
- 42,000 children died, leaving behind grieving parents<sup>4</sup>

Behind these grim statistics we find real tears and broken homes, loneliness and heartbreak.

No, you are not alone in the realities of life in a broken world.

Nor are you alone in seeking help. Americans spent over \$150 billion dollars last year on medications and therapy, trying to find relief from their mental struggles.<sup>5</sup> Maybe, like them, you've tried everything: consulting the experts, paying therapists, changing medications, reading self-help books, getting more exercise, staying home, staying out, drinking less, drinking more. You may have replayed the past over and over in your mind and in your nightmares, longing for solutions.

Might there be a spiritual component to your problem? Could there be a real God who has something to say about your struggle? *And, you may be daring to hope, does He care? Does He love me? Is there some cosmic purpose in my suffering? Can I access His power and help?*

This article will attempt to show you that the answer to these questions is "yes".

You are not alone. Let's do a mental exercise. Get up and walk outside. Look up at the vastness of the sky and clouds and stars. Our planet circles one star, among the 200 billion in our galaxy, among the two trillion galaxies in the universe. Try to wrap your mind around the size of that universe...and then imagine Someone who knows each and every atom, and who holds them all in the palm of His hand. Your problems are not too big for Him!

Next, think back as many years as you can remember, maybe back to when you were three. Try to imagine a million years before that, then a million lying ahead, far into the future. Now, can you fathom Someone who has existed a million times longer still?

Remember, if there is a God, then He is vast, infinite, and utterly different from us. He's the creator of all we see, all we don't see, and of our own human race. He created you. He knows you. His brainpower is so far beyond ours it's as if all our knowledge were contained in a grain of sand, while His understanding dwarfs the universe. He knows it all, the past, the future, the grand sweep and the intimately personal.

Everything we experience, the good and the bad, happens under the watchful eye of the King of the Universe.

**Question:** Are you open to considering the perspective of Someone so wise and powerful?

## God Knows You and Loves You

You are not an accident, nor are you the result of random events. You were created by God, and are intimately known by Him. He is not only infinitely greater than us, but also is near us, involving Himself in the details of our daily lives. He knows every cell in your body and every thought in your mind. His complete knowledge means that even when we have a hard time figuring out why we do and say the things we do, the Lord is perfectly aware. This was an amazing realization to one Hebrew poet:

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue, you, LORD, know it completely. (Psalm 139:1-4)

To this author, God's detailed knowledge was comforting...but why? If God knows every secret thought, every unwise decision, every impulsive word—shouldn't we be just little embarrassed? Or even...afraid?

This poet rested in God's unlimited knowledge because he knew that God CARES. He cares about you. Unlike every other creature on earth, you are "made in His image", and He has chosen to love you in a unique relationship. Maybe you've suffered through abandonment, abuse, betrayal...maybe you don't feel cared for by anyone. So why would God be any different? And if He's so loving, why hasn't He given you a break? If you've wondered these things, remember, "He perceives your thoughts from afar"! He isn't shocked by them. Unfazed by these questions, the God of the universe patiently reminds us that He is like:

a tender father giving his child a present (Matthew 7:9-11)

a gentle mother comforting a crying child (Isaiah 66:13)

a hen gathering her vulnerable chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37)

It may be difficult to believe that the greatest being of all could feel or treat you tenderly. Here's where a human helper, a biblical counselor, comes in. Your counselor will understand your hesitation; he or she will come alongside you to help you begin to believe that there is hope and care in the world. For now, you might just have to hold on to your counselor's hope! Soon you will begin to see for yourself how faithful and powerful and loving God is.

"...Casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:17)

**Question:** Do you want help learning how to experience the love and care of the God of the universe?

## God Has Spoken

God communicates uniquely with our species! This fact forms the basis of all biblical counseling. The infinite Creator has bridged an infinite chasm to speak to His finite creatures. Think about it: does an ant understand the molecular composition of the sand in its anthill? Can your dog grasp what you are doing as you text your friend? No, there's a vast difference between an ant or dog brain and a human brain—and an infinite one between a human and God. We could never comprehend His character or His ways—unless He helped us! Thankfully, this is exactly what He's done!

First, consider how He speaks through nature. We've talked about its vastness...but what about its intricacy and order? What about the 73 million trillion atoms in each grain of sand in that ant's hill? If you've watched an eclipse, or a spider weaving a web, or the birth of a child, you may have already concluded that this beauty and order had to come from somewhere...the atoms had to have a beginning. This complexity and order reminds us, in a general way, that there is a powerful creator out there.

But He's more than just a mighty force; He's a Being, with a personality and thoughts and will. Some aspects of His character would be known only if He explained them specifically, so He also communicates with his creation through language. Throughout the ages He has chosen to speak to human beings in various ways; the record of these messages is what we call the Bible.

The Bible addresses an amazing breadth of topics, covering every significant issue that affects our years on earth. Peter, Jesus's follower, observed that God has given us "everything we need for life," and that the resources are found "in His precious promises." (2 Peter 1:3)

This is a stunning claim: **everything** we need to know about ourselves, our world, and our God—that is, everything we need in order to live a joyful, meaningful life—is contained within the covers of the Bible.

On the Bible's pages you'll find accounts of men and women just like us, facing all the same struggles we do. They suffered rejection, betrayal, divorce, miscarriage, infertility, addictions, depression, anxiety, disappointment, loss, grief, peer pressure, abuse, torture, and murder. And like us, they also battled character flaws such as pride, impulsiveness, carelessness, greed, self-righteousness, bigotry, rage, bitterness, cowardice, and all manner of immorality. Their stories were preserved for our benefit.

But the Bible is not written like an encyclopedia, where you can turn to the glossary or index to find out about these topics. It's more like a one-volume library, containing histories, poems, biographies, memoirs, and personal letters. A skilled biblical counselor will serve as your guide, helping you explore and understand the riches of God's word and see how it connects with your story. You'll begin to see how it cuts through mere "thou shalt nots" to get at the deep places in your heart. You will begin to gain hope as you read the Bible; like King David, you'll see that:

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. (Psalm 19:8)

**Question:** Do you long to find the joy and light promised in God's Word?

## Jesus Christ is the Center

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to stand in the presence of the great Creator of the universe? Maybe you've heard that He's angry with you; maybe you know that you haven't measured up to what a holy being might require and you're a little afraid to find out what He thinks of you. Your past may have included abuse that led to a pervasive sense of shame. Or you may have committed a crime that keeps you isolated in your own world. Maybe you've been rejected by so many people over the years that you dread more of the same from the most important being of all.

It is true that only perfect purity has a right to be in God's presence. It is true that our selfish and rebellious ways have cut us off from many of God's richest blessings. Measured next to a holy God, we all deserve to be punished forever. This is where Christian belief differs from every other religious system. We can't get to God by being good, by improving our behavior, by getting a grip on our unhealthy habits, or by offering some kind of sacrifice. He's too holy; the bar is too high. And yet, Scripture invites us to:

“draw near with confidence” (Hebrews 10:22)

“approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16)

On the one hand we're told to come; on the other hand we're locked out by our stained consciences. So...if we can't approach directly, what can be done? We need a go-between. That go-between would have to be a person like us, so he could stand in for us as our representative. But he would need to be perfect; if he weren't, he would be excluded and needy like us.

Jesus Christ is that necessary mediator. He is God who became man, who lived out the life we should live, who took on the capital punishment we deserve, who came back from the dead, and who now actively comes alongside us with sympathy and power. He is described by one of God's spokesmen as a “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” He knows our pain, walked the path of suffering, wrestled with temptation. He gets us!

In another biblical passage Jesus is called “the wonderful counselor” (Isaiah 9:6)—which means He is just the ally you need. Although your human counselor is limited in knowledge and experience, he or she will be calling upon THE counselor who can help you.

So biblical counsel will aim you not merely at a generic God, at spirituality, at morality: help will come through knowing a real live person, Jesus Christ, whose counsel will be the wisest, best help you can imagine. He Himself holds out to you this hope:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus Christ is the reason we're able to approach God boldly—not timidly, fearfully, tentatively clinging to inadequate credentials, but:

In [Jesus] and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. (Ephesians 3:12)

**Question:** Do you long to experience the welcome that God extends to you through Jesus Christ?

## God Changes Us

The goal of biblical counseling is growth and change. God intends to change you, not only into a better “you”, but into someone whose life brings pleasure to the King of the Universe. Does that sound unattainable?

Consider the lives of two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John. When they first joined Jesus’ followers, He gave them an amusing nickname: “The Sons of Thunder,” a reference to their fiery tempers. They had an anger problem! But their experience as Christ-followers transformed them. By the end of their lives, their personalities had changed. John authored three tender letters, preserved in the New Testament, earning him a new nickname, “The Apostle of Love.”

If you’ve been stuck in years of therapy, you may find it hard to believe that this depth of change is possible. Yet change is God’s purpose for you. It’s true that as long as we live on this planet, we will always be tempted to make unwise decisions, self-medicate with unhealthy habits, give in to dark thoughts and actions. But it’s also true that, if you are a true believer in Christ, He is changing you. Your life doesn’t have to be dominated by anxiety, driven by corrupt thoughts, controlled by anger or bitterness or the memories of a traumatic past.

But these changes won’t come automatically. There’s no insight, magic verse, profound phrase, or Facebook meme that will suddenly fix your life. Instead, your counselor will help you make steady progress toward profound change as you cooperate with God’s process. You’ll need three T’s:

**Time.** Unlike those who assume they’ll see a therapist their whole life, you’ll need to commit yourself to a few months of consistent meetings (probably weekly) with your biblical counselor. You won’t make much progress if your meetings are so sporadic that you forget what you’ve learned from one appointment to the next.

**Teachability.** A wise Hebrew philosopher advised:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.

This will bring health to your body, and nourishment to your bones. (Proverbs 3:5-7)

It may be hard to lay aside your own evaluation of what’s wrong with your life, and be willing to listen to an invisible God who perhaps hasn’t yet won your trust. But try to have an open attitude, allowing yourself to consider a different perspective. You can even ask the Lord to help you be a humble learner. Trust your biblical counselor to help you learn to trust your God.

**Toil.** Your counselor will work to deeply understand your suffering and walk alongside you in it. You’ll have lots of opportunities to tell your story and pour out your thoughts. But you’ll also be expected to work on your problems. The weekly meeting with your counselor is not the “golden hour”; instead, change will happen during the week as you do your homework. A key factor in your success will be how much attention and thoughtfulness you pour into these assignments. You may be asked to read articles, reflect on Bible verses, write in a journal, or work on a relationship.

Of course, if you’re anticipating an unusually busy week you can tell your counselor you need a more streamlined assignment. But in general, the more faithfully you work on your homework, the faster you’ll make progress. The fog will lift; your problems will lose their tyranny over you; you’ll see realities and embrace goals that you were not aware of; you’ll gain hope.

**Question:** Are you willing to commit to time, teachability, and toil in order to see change in your situation?

## “Big C” versus “little c”

In some ways, everybody “counsels”! We all listen to our friends, we express opinions, we talk on the phone with family, we discuss our difficulties, we give advice over a cup of coffee at Starbucks. These are examples of what we might call “little c” counseling—the informal give and take of human conversation. These ordinary relationships are part of God’s plan for helping us live healthy lives, though obviously, some advice is better than others!

In one sense, any friend who leads you toward the wisdom and hope of God’s Word is offering you biblical counsel. But you may benefit from more formal “Big C Counseling”—the focused attention of a well-trained biblical counselor, someone who has studied the practical application of Truth to the problems of life. Typically a biblical counselor will not be licensed by the state; he may not even be a paid clergy member; but the counselor will have completed a course of preparation in how to connect the truth of the Bible to the challenges of today’s world.

During formalized counseling, you agree to be under the leadership of your counselor for a certain period, typically a few months. You accept and complete homework assignments; you honestly explain your thoughts and responses; even if you’re familiar with the Bible, you re-read and re-apply the passages your counselor assigns. Your counselor will help you respond to past abuse, suffering, and mistreatment in a way that brings joy to you and honor to God, and will help you tackle areas of weakness and sin.

But this person is not somehow above you: your counselor is your fellow-journeyer, a struggler like you who is actively growing and seeing life change as well. Unlike a stranger, he or she will not maintain a “professional distance”, but will love you as a brother or sister. One counselor helped a depressed counselee to organize her pantry; another babysat the children of a struggling couple so they could have a date night. A counselor with financial experience assisted a couple with basic budgeting. You will find a welcome combination of confident helping, compassionate listening, and practical help for your needs.

Your counselor will keep confidentiality—up to a certain point. If it appears that you may endanger yourself or others, then your counselor will probably be required by law to call in outside help. If your counselor works through a local church, the pastor may be consulted. A counselor-in-training may be included as an observer in your meetings. All these are held to a high level of confidentiality.

Although your counselor will listen to, care about, and sympathize with any past trauma you may wish to share, the goal is not to dig up your darkest secrets. Rather, the Bible points us forward, toward the solutions God offers to help you live a different life today—and tomorrow.

At some point, if you’ve faithfully done your homework and seen change in your situation, your need for weekly directive “Big C” counseling appointments will end. You’ll become dependent not on your counselor, but on Jesus Christ.

However, you’ll always need friends in your life—fellow journeyers whom you can consult and serve, who can help you follow Christ. If you’ve been isolated, trying to handle life by yourself, your counselor will help you make a plan for developing ongoing healthy relationships. You weren’t designed to make it on your own!

**Question:** Wouldn’t you like a biblical counselor to come alongside you in your journey?



## So is biblical counseling for you?

If you:

- believe that there may be a God
- are open to seeing things from His perspective
- are willing to do some home assignments
- are willing to trust and receive theological guidance from someone

Then yes, biblical counseling is for you! Find a biblical counselor in your area and reach out. By this time next year, you could be experiencing what David described:

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. (Psalm 19:8)

### How to find a biblical counselor near you

The following organizations affirm the basic tenet of biblical counseling: God's Word, as contained in the Bible, is sufficient to bring about growth and life change. Some of these organizations provide training programs and/or certification for biblical counselors.

- Association of Certified Biblical Counselors ([biblicalcounseling.com](http://biblicalcounseling.com))
- Biblical Counseling Coalition ([Biblicalcounselingcoalition.org](http://Biblicalcounselingcoalition.org))
- Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation ([ccef.org](http://ccef.org))
- International Association of Biblical Counselors ([iabc.net](http://iabc.net))
- Association of Biblical Counselors ([christiancounseling.com](http://christiancounseling.com))

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhamcs/web\\_tables/2015\\_ed\\_web\\_tables.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhamcs/web_tables/2015_ed_web_tables.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/life-stages-and-populations.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/02/magazine/the-half-trillion-dollar-depression.html>

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