

# Depression and Faithfulness

*A sermon on Mark 13:1-8 & 1 Samuel 2:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 November 2024*

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## Message

Perhaps amidst the increasingly depressing state of the world, Jesus is calling us to learn the path of faithfulness from those who never win.

## Sermon

In recent months I've been increasingly gripped by feelings of depression. I haven't sought treatment for it, because I've had a quite strong sense that my depression made perfectly good sense and is perhaps pretty much what I should be feeling at present. I don't doubt for a moment that there is a medical form of depression that should be treated with pharmaceuticals, but I don't think that's where I'm at. If I remember rightly, it was Mork, from the early eighties sitcom *Mork and Mindy*, who said "when everyone's out to get you, paranoia is just good sense." Well, when everything is depressing, maybe depression is just good sense too.

This is not a therapy session, so I'm not here to unpack all the layers of my multi-dimensional depression, but the biggest factor by far runs smack into a couple of today's Bible readings and into the world news of recent weeks, so you're going to get a bit of the big one.

Kasey Chambers once said in one of her songs that "if you're not pissed off with the world, you're just not paying attention." Well, maybe I've paying a bit too much attention, because I'm certainly pissed off with the world, and a bit too often lately it's left me curled up on the couch drinking whiskey, eating rubbish, and binging on rubbish TV shows. That's not a healthy response by any measure, and I don't recommend it, but actually, being depressed about the world at the moment is probably perfectly healthy. If you've been paying close attention to the state of the world and you're feeling mighty cheerful about it, it's probably you that we should all be worrying about, not those of us who are feeling depressed.

It's a total shit show out there. The nation of Israel, which was created as a safe haven for one of the most consistently and horrifically persecuted people in the history of the world, has decided to take its turn at being one of the biggest and most brazen genocidal oppressors, and the rest of us in the Western World have discovered that our economic and political systems are so enmeshed with theirs that we are completely incapable of doing anything strong enough to exert any restraining influence, so we just stand there helplessly with blood all over our hands while innocent civilians are slaughtered by the thousands.

We could work our way around the globe – Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, Burma, Venezuela – and the stories don't get any better. Much of the horror doesn't even make our news sources because if we copped that much bad news we'd turn it off, and the broadcasters don't want us doing that. Here in Australia we recently tried to take a major step forward in dealing with our sorry history of crushing Indigenous peoples, and we just screwed it up and made it worse. It's a total shit show out there. And inside the Church is no refuge. Yet another major church leader resigned last week over a sex abuse scandal.

And then there was the US presidential election ...

Jesus said, “Do you see these great buildings, these great institutions? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come claiming to be some kind of chosen messiah, and they will lead many astray. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but that’s not the end. Worse is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and people will be polarised into factions that hate each other; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is just the beginning ...”

Jesus said this just a few days before he was lynched and killed, and he knew what was coming. Sounds to me like he was feeling depressed about the state of the world too.

I was listening to the [Inverse Podcast](#) the other day and they were interviewing David Gushee just a day or two after the US election. Gushee is a Baptist Pastor and a major Christian ethicist, and he’s about the same age as me. He was speaking about his own feelings of failure and futility. A couple of years ago he wrote an excellent book called *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* ([see his own summary of it here](#)), and since then he’s spent much of his time preaching and lecturing in churches and colleges across the USA, trying to open the eyes of Christians to the dangers of a rising reactionary Christianity that responds to a perceived loss of cultural dominance by selling itself out to authoritarian political leaders who promise to stop the rot and shore up their power and social status. But this week, David Gushee is feeling like not just his recent work, but his entire career as a public ethicist has been a failure. Things have only got worse.

Listening to him helped me put words on what I am feeling. It is not just that the world is a shit show and getting worse. It is that I have thought of my vocation as preaching hope and progress and positive transformation, and helping the world to become a better place. So if that’s been my calling for the past 34 years, and the world is continuing to go to shit faster than ever, what does that mean about me? Am I completely deluded, or just a miserable failure?

What happened to all that stuff we sang in the Cantic of Hannah tonight? “The weapons of the strong are broken, the defenceless gain strength. The overfed now toil to eat, while the hungry have their fill.” “God silences the wicked in darkness; their power does not prevail.” I thought I was part of that project, but it sure looks like their power is prevailing to me. It was right there when I turned on the news.

“Do you see these great buildings, these great institutions? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. And worse is still to come.”

Maybe it is not just me and David Gushee feeling like we’ve failed, feeling depressed. Maybe it is Jesus too.

A couple of weeks back, we heard the story of Jesus opening the eyes of Bartimaeus and we looked at how it concluded a whole sequence of stories of Jesus trying and trying and mostly failing to open the eyes of his disciples to what was really going on. It was clearly discouraging. But now we are hearing Jesus dealing with his own failure on a bigger scale. He has been warning the people of Israel that the reckless path they were on would bring the whole world crashing down on their heads in the form of the Roman army, and in tonight’s

reading, you can hear that Jesus knows he has failed to get through to them. Things have gone too far to turn around and the fate of Jerusalem is sealed. It's pretty depressing.

But in case you are starting to worry, this is not me telling you I'm going to step down anytime soon. This is not a resignation letter. Because here's the thing: whether I like it or not, this path of failure and heartache is what I signed up for. Succeeding and winning and achieving were actually never something that Jesus promised us. Not long after these words we heard from Jesus tonight, he was on his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane sweating blood and begging for a way out of the shit show that was coming down on his head. And there was no way out, so the next day he was dead, nailed to a wooden post, as public a failure as anyone could ever be.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he's not calling us to the path where we're going to win big and win and win so much we're going to get sick of winning. The one who promised that was Donald Trump, not Jesus. Jesus is not calling us to a path of victory and success and triumph. He's calling us to the way of the cross, a way of rejection and humiliation. As Daniel Berrigan put it, if you're serious about following Jesus, you'd better look good on wood.

I'm feeling depressed and like I'm a failure because I haven't been very effective in what I thought I was called to do. But Jesus actually hasn't called me to be effective. He's calling us to be faithful. And if faithfulness is occasionally effective, that's probably going to be the rare exception, not the rule.

Many of us, certainly me, were raised on the optimism of that Cantic of Hannah that we sang before. The trouble was that we were embarrassed to be associated with those end-of-the-world fanatics, so we tended hear these predictions of a day when the world is put to right as an expectation of progressive improvement, of history bending towards justice and hope. We have tended to think that if we work hard enough, and educate hard enough, and campaign hard enough, the world will keep getting better. More and more people will be won over to the ways of justice and peace and care and hospitality and social inclusion.

Well that optimism is out the window now. Two weeks ago, more than 50% of the nation that promotes itself as the most Christian, most democratic nation on earth chose as their leader and figurehead a man who was perfectly open and transparent about his commitments to retribution, to authoritarianism, and to crushing the hopes of many of those who had been drawn to the Statue of Liberty's promise of a golden door of welcome for the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Donald Trump didn't deceive anyone. He told everyone exactly who he was and what he stood for, and the majority said, "Yes, we recognise ourselves in that. That's the nation we want to be."

So much for optimism about social progress.

But maybe that optimism was always delusional, and maybe being striped of our delusions is actually a step in the right direction, however painful and depressing it might feel. If we are going to break free of our addiction to expecting to be on the winning side, maybe we need to listen more to the voices of those who know better what it is like to lose and lose and lose again. Maybe we need to listen to those whose hopes and dreams are forever being trampled down and crushed under the grinding heels of harsh political and social reality. Maybe we

need to listen a lot more to First Nations peoples, to refugees, to racial and sexual minorities, to the poor and broken.

This week I read a very eye-opening analysis of the US election result from one of our friends at First Baptist in Matanzas, Cuba. Stan is originally from North Carolina, but he has lived long enough in Cuba to see the USA through the eyes of those who suffer under the crippling and unjust embargo it has maintained against Cuba.

Stan suggested that we might see the re-election of Donald Trump as an answer to the prayer to not lead us into temptation. He reckons that we in the more progressive oriented churches are constantly tempted to delude ourselves into thinking that the lesser of two evils is actually a good and godly thing, and so mistakenly imagine that the more attractive of two political parties is therefore an agent of the kingdom of God.

We should be able to understand this from our viewpoint in Australia, but we mostly don't. Kamala Harris and the US Democratic party might be the more progressive of the two major parties in the USA, but they are so far to the right of anything in Australia that they make our conservative coalition parties look like radical Greens. Stan reckons that, in effect, the Democrats and Republicans are just two wings of one party, the party of imperial capitalism, exploiting the less militarised peoples of the world for their labor and their resources to enrich America. The Democrats are the more polite and cultured and polished wing, but except for a few minor differences around the edges, they stand for much the same voracious American supremacism.

So Stan reckons that having elected a wolf in wolf's clothing instead of a wolf in sheep's clothing, the churches might have been saved from the temptation to congratulate themselves that the election of Kamala Harris would have represented genuine progress towards a kingdom of love and justice and freedom for all. And if you think that is unfair, just look at the way the USA under a Democratic presidency has continued to arm and fund the Israeli military as it slaughters thousands of innocent civilians in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Lebanon. Kamala Harris might have socially snubbed Benjamin Netanyahu, but she offered no change of policy. Maybe that's not her fault; maybe she is locked into a closed system. But that's the point. The election was between nakedly nasty American supremacism and American supremacism cloaked in niceness.

At least the naked version delivers us from the temptation of ongoing delusion.

That's as depressing as hell. And sometimes when I'm curled up on the couch, it feels like I'd be willing to opt for ongoing delusion over honest and well-founded depression. But the truth is that delusion is as unhealthy as too much alcohol and junk food. It never helps us get anywhere worth going. So, despite my frequent doubts and fears, I'd rather embrace this depression and fall on my knees in Gethsemane where I might meet Jesus in the darkness and see things as they really are. If there is any hope, it starts from here.

And as painful as this historic moment might be, perhaps it gives us a genuine opportunity to uncouple our minds from the imperialist mindset that sees our nation, and sometimes even our churches, so subserviently aligned with the American supremacism project. Because only when we begin to do that will we be able to find a path of real support for the poor and huddled masses of the world, a path of loving companionship with the crucified peoples of

the world. And in taking that path lies our hope of meeting the crucified Jesus where he really is and participating in what he's really doing.

And if you find that hope as painful and depressing as I do, the Lord is inviting us to his Table to share a strong drink!

*This sermon hasn't offered a lot of forward looking guidance for how to live in the midst of such depressing times. That's partly the constraints of space and mostly because I am just not there yet. But my colleague Andrea Prior has written some helpful notes, partly in response to reading a draft of this sermon, and [you can find them here](#). If you want a bit more background on why Andrea is referring to Donald Trump as "Nero" you can [read this previous article](#).*