

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S PASTORAL CARE IN OLYMPIAS'S DESPONDENCY

Jeremy T. Oliver¹

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, theologian Thomas Oden read Nemesius's *On the Nature of Man*. While reading this ancient, theological work, he was convicted that he embraced modern theological argumentation to the neglect of the wisdom of the Christian tradition.² In his forties and armed with this new revelation, Oden's life and research was set on a new trajectory of harkening back to the historical Christian tradition and bringing it to the attention of others.³

In the course of this mission, he realized that a major chasm existed between historical and modern pastoral care. Of modern pastoral care, Oden notes:

The task of the pastoral counselor thus understood in recent years has tended to become that of trying to ferret out what is currently happening or likely to happen next in the sphere of emergent psychologies and adapting it as deftly as possible to the work of ministry. In the adaptation, however, the fundament of Christian pastoral care in its classical sense has at best been neglected and at worst polemicized. So pastoral theology has become in many cases little more than a thoughtless mimic of the most current psychological trends.⁴

Recognizing this massive neglect, Oden further wrote, "A major effort is needed

¹ Jeremy Oliver is an Assistant Professor of Applied Theology at Cedarville University. He may be reached at jeremyoliver@cedarville.edu.

² Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 1989), 219-220.

³ For a detailed history of Thomas Oden's life and transition in convictions and research, see Thomas C. Oden, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 33.

today to rediscover and remin the classical models of Christian pastoral care and to make available once again the key texts of that classical tradition following about fifty years of neglect, the depths of which are arguably unprecedented in any previous Christian century.”⁵ Within his work, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, Oden overviews Gregory the Great’s *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, seeking to show that, although written centuries ago, it speaks to contemporary pastoral care.⁶ Oden’s critics do not see the practical feasibility of studying the classic pastoral tradition;⁷ however, Oden has shown that Gregory the Great’s *The Book of Pastoral Rule* is accessible and applicable to contemporary pastoral care.⁸

The question arises, can Thomas Oden’s theory that the classic Christian tradition of pastoral care has contemporary relevance be shown prior to Gregory the Great? Passing away 133 years prior to Gregory’s birth was another father of the Church whose extensive writings influenced many in their approach to pastoral care. That man is John Chrysostom, whose extensive writings and sermons have greatly influenced many generations of Christians.⁹

⁵ Oden, *Care of Souls*, 26.

⁶ Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007). Thomas Oden gave a systematized overview of the Christian classic tradition in his four-volume work on the subject. Thomas C. Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care: Four-Volume Set* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2000). In addition, William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle provide an overview of key, classic Christian figures in *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), as does Andrew Purves in *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Predating Oden’s work is a survey of pastoral care by John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Others have now begun to write surveys of key figures in classical pastoral care, including Robert W. Kellemen, *Counseling Under the Cross: How Martin Luther Applied the Gospel to Daily Life* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017) and Mark A. Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places; The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

⁷ See Lewis Seymour Mudge, “Gathering around the Center: A Reply to Thomas Oden,” *The Christian Century* 112 (1995): 392-96 and Cornelius Plantinga, “Response to Thomas C. Oden, ‘The Long Journey Home,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 93-96.

⁸ Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*.

⁹ Although speaking a bit hyperbolically, David Ford writes of Chrysostom’s popularity in the history of Christianity, “His extensive, detailed exegetical preaching on many books of the Bible – especially the Gospels of Matthew and John, Acts, and the Pauline Epistles – makes him the greatest biblical commentator in the history of the Greek-speaking Church, and the spiritual depth and melodic eloquence of his sermons make him the greatest preacher in the history of Christianity, both in the East and the West.” David C. Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia* by John Chrysostom, ed. by David C. Ford (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2016), 9. J.N.D Kelly notes of the amount of sermon-commentaries still preserved, “[They] form the most impressive, and also most readable, collection of patristic expositions of Scripture.” J.N.D.

John Chrysostom's writings contain a unique collection of letters to his spiritual daughter, a long-standing deaconess in Constantinople, named Olympias.¹⁰ Olympias was a wealthy widow who had dedicated her life and wealth to serving God. Like Chrysostom, Olympias valued asceticism. She served alongside Chrysostom during his time as Bishop of Constantinople. When Chrysostom was exiled and those supportive of Chrysostom were ostracized and persecuted, Olympias struggled greatly with despondency. While Chrysostom wrote many other letters during his exile, his letters to Olympias are unique, outlining a progression of Chrysostom's pastoral care for Olympias in her continued battle with despondency.¹¹ Because of this, these letters are a valuable resource for the modern day, providing a case study through which one can view Chrysostom's approach to pastoral care. In addition, these personal letters, written to a woman for whom he greatly cared, are not easily open to the charge of great hyperbole or exaggeration as is his preaching.¹² Therefore, the argument found in this paper is that John Chrysostom believed the Scriptures to be authoritative and sufficient to treat despondency, as shown in his letters to Olympias.

CHYSOSTOM'S UNDERSTANDING OF DESPONDENCY

To properly understand the pastoral care that Chrysostom gave Olympias, it is necessary for us to clearly understand what he means by 'despondency'. The word

Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 94. For detailed biographies of John Chrysostom, see W.R.W. Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom: His Life and Times – A Sketch of the Church and the Empire in the Fourth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1880), *Chrysostomus Baur, John Chrysostom and His Time* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1959), and J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*.

¹⁰ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 17. Throughout writings on the life Olympias, the spelling *Olympias* is typically used. David Ford used the alternative spelling, *Olympia*. Unless referring to the title of Ford's translation of *Letters to Saint Olympia* or in a quotation, this paper will use the traditional spelling of *Olympias*. For further biographical information on Olympias, see Elizabeth Clark, ed., *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

¹¹ David Ford notes how extensive Chrysostom's letter writing was during this period, "These are only a small portion of all his extant letters – some 236 of them, written to about 150 different people while he was in exile." Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 21. Yet, as Johannes Quasten notes, "The longest and most cordial are the seventeen communications which he wrote to the widow and deaconess Olympias." Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: Volume III – The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1986), 469.

¹² For example, J.N.D. Kelly notes of Chrysostom's first sermon that he utilized the "stock-in-trade of the ancient genre of encomium as modified by Christian orators" that would be open to exaggerated compliments of Bishop Flavian, whom he eulogized in the sermon. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

translated despondency, ἀθυμία, is not found in the Scriptures. However, looking at the context of Chrysostom's usage of the word and how he applies it to various biblical characters, it can be shown that Chrysostom understood despondency to be a moral issue akin to spiritually-driven despair or depression.

Chrysostom's Usage of Despondency in *Letters to Saint Olympia*

Within the *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom makes sixty-one references to despondency. In a brief survey of the context surrounding Chrysostom's use of the term despondency, it is clear that John sees it as something that can be "chased away"¹³; that one can lead himself from despondency¹⁴; that it can grow worse and become a "tyranny"¹⁵; others can speak into and help alleviate despondency¹⁶; that humanity's increasing in despondency is the desire of the devil¹⁷; that death is easier to bear than extreme despondency¹⁸; that by continuing in despondency one is "demanding a punishment"¹⁹; and that despondency can "produce physical illness."²⁰

David Ford recognized a similar usage of despondency. In the introduction to his translation of *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Ford notes:

[T]he most common theme in these letters is that of instructing Olympia how to avert and overcome the despondency that continually plagues her.... In the letters Chrysostom repeatedly expresses his conviction that despondency is brought on and sustained by *faulty thinking* – by negative, debilitating *thoughts* (*logismoi*) – and so he is likewise convinced that it can be willfully overcome through *proper thinking*.²¹

While this briefly surveys Chrysostom's usage of the word, the issue remains

¹³ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, trans. David C. Ford (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 2016), 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103-4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 145.

²⁰ Ibid., 159-60.

²¹ Ibid., 22. In addition, Ford sees that despondency could be translated "despondency/despair/depression", depending upon the context (Ibid).

how despondency corresponds to Scripture since ἀθυμία is not found in Scripture. Was despondency a new concept that Chrysostom did not see in Scripture? Did he see it as a new problem in humanity that Olympias was facing? As will be shown below, Chrysostom believed his understanding and instruction on despondency was clearly found in Scripture.

Chrysostom's Application of Despondency to Biblical Characters in *Letters to Saint Olympia*

Although the specific term 'despondency' is not mentioned in Scripture, Chrysostom examines multiple biblical figures and applies Scripture related to their lives to his instruction on despondency. While his letters to Olympias are rich with biblical references, letter ten devotes a large amount of attention to biblical figures he wants Olympias to consider. Examining letter ten will provide a thorough sampling of Chrysostom's understanding of despondency.

Chrysostom begins by discussing those who saw how debilitating despondency could be. He notes Elijah's despondency in regards to his flight from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19. Chrysostom writes, “[Elijah] could not bear the tyranny of despondency [*athymias*], for he *was* greatly despairing [*ēthymei*]....”²² In a similar context, he mentions Jonah who, “in fleeing from despair, sought refuge in death...”²³ and David in Psalm 38 who, “was indicating that that fire, fiercer than fire, is the passion of despondency.”²⁴ He also examines Job and how he saw death as a relief from despondency (Job 3:23). Chrysostom writes, “Thus despondency is more burdensome than everything else; and as it is more burdensome, its recompense will be greater.”²⁵

The theme of suffering as a means of bringing greater eternal reward is prominent in Chrysostom's letters. In letter ten, he cites the example of Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) who suffered greatly in life. Of him, Chrysostom writes, “So even though he did not accomplish anything noble, and only because he bore his despondency nobly, he obtained the same end as the patriarch [Abraham] who did accomplish such acts of virtue”.²⁶ Continuing in this subject, Chrysostom

²² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

moves to the Apostle Paul, noting that if "...sufferings have great rewards, and despair is the most grievous and most painful of all suffering, imagine what will be the recompense for it!"²⁷

Chrysostom then transitions to an extended discourse on Joseph, who suffered greatly yet avoided despondency. Chrysostom writes of Joseph's time in jail and his care for the baker and the butler:

He was so far from being under the sway of despondency that he even dissipated the grief of others with him. For when he saw certain ones troubled and confounded and despairing, he came to them immediately, asking the reason. And learning that the disturbance was caused by visions in dreams, he interpreted those dreams.²⁸

This brief survey of biblical characters mentioned in letter 10 showed that Chrysostom clearly understood despondency to be an issue affecting individuals in Scripture. At this point, it is helpful for us to consider how Chrysostom addresses despondency outside the writings of these letters to Olympias.

Chrysostom's Uses of Despondency Beyond Letters to Saint Olympia

In his *Ad Stagirium*, John Chrysostom speaks of Stageirios and the sin of despondency. Stageirios was a monk who, upon entering the life of monasticism, had physical struggles. This was possibly from seizures or, Stageirios theorized, demonic affliction.²⁹ Because of these physical maladies, Stageirios contemplated suicide. In his pastoral counsel, Chrysostom understood Stageirios's thoughts to be a moral issue.³⁰ In this work, Chrysostom goes on to talk of the sin of giving in to despondency. Thuminger and Singer note:

For many people, [Chrysostom] writes, a physical illness is a reason for *athumia*, since bodily suffering always oppresses the soul as well. Stageirios, in contrast, has been relatively lucky in that he is only affected by the *daimōn* in the soul, and temporarily. He should

²⁷ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 110-11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁹ Chiara Thuminger and P.N. Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine: From Celsus to Paul of Aegina* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 90.

³⁰ W.R.W. Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom*, 85.

concentrate on resisting *athumia*, for this is a greater threat than any *daimōn*; Stageirios has greater chances of success, one might add, since neither fasting nor asceticism helped him against the seizures, and the (exorcistic?) efforts of several holy men were also of no avail.³¹

Considering Chrysostom's overall usage of ἀθυμία across his writings and sermons, patristic scholar Robert G.T. Edwards notes, "In each case 'dejection' or 'despondency' seem to be the best English translations of ἀθυμία: they convey the inaction or lassitude associated with sadness, sorrow, grief, and despair."³² Scholar Jessica Wright, similar to Robert G.T. Edwards, recognized that this word in John Chrysostom's writing denotes, "lack of spirit," often translated as 'despondency' or 'depression'."³³

From this understanding, it is reasonable to conclude that John Chrysostom saw despondency as a morally-laden issue that one must overcome in a spiritual manner. In addition, while John did not give a precise definition to despondency, he seems to have understood it to be synonymous with the idea of spiritual despair or depression.

CHYSOSTOM'S UNDERSTANDING OF MEDICAL PHYSICIANS' TREATMENTS

J.N.D. Kelly argues that as Olympias's despondency continued, John Chrysostom could not adequately treat it. He writes, "His ill-success is not really surprising; in her deep prostration she needed something more than intellectual reassurance and brisk admonition to pull herself together. For all his affection and devotion John was temperamentally unsuited to enter sympathetically into her psychological predicament."³⁴ It is true that Olympias's despondency came back and Chrysostom's pastoral care was cut short by his death. However, in making these statements, Kelly is moving from detailing history to making interpretive

³¹ Thuminger and Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, 90.

³² Robert G.T. Edwards, "Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom's Letters to Olympias," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28 (2020): 8.

³³ Jessica L. Wright, "Between Despondency and the Demon: Diagnosing and Treating Spiritual Disorders in John Chrysostom's Letter to Stageirios," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8 (2015): 352.

³⁴ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

statements regarding that history. Kelly is interpreting Chrysostom's spiritual guidance as insufficient, either because of lack of knowledge of such issues or his inability. Alternative to Kelly, it could be said that Chrysostom believed Olympias's despondency was a spiritual issue. As such, her despondency needed a spiritual solution and would have rejected a non-spiritual alternative that could potentially be offered by the medical establishment. As will be shown, Chrysostom had a clear understanding of medical practices of his day and never told Olympias to seek medical attention for her despondency, which would have been reasonable if he had understood it to be a physical malady.

CHYSOSTOM'S REFERENCES TO PHYSICIAN TREATMENTS FOR PHYSICAL MALADIES

Chrysostom also recognized the importance of medical treatments throughout his writings. He did not view physicians and their treatments negatively. That is initially apparent in Chrysostom's personal need for regular medical care. As a young man Chrysostom took his ascetic lifestyle to the extreme of living in a mountain cave for two years, depriving his body of sleep, or of even lying down.³⁵ When his health greatly deteriorated, Chrysostom returned to the city. Robert Payne notes, "His stomach shriveled up, and his kidneys were damaged by the cold. His digestion permanently impaired, unable to doctor himself, he came down the mountain, walked to Antioch and appeared before Archbishop Meletius, who immediately sent him to a doctor...."³⁶

For the rest of his life, Chrysostom relied on medical practices to help his physical maladies. Throughout *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom mentioned being treated by doctors for his physical condition. For example, from Caesarea he writes, "I have enjoyed great solitude, having encountered some excellent, extremely reputable doctors who succeed in their healing ministry to me not only through their skill but also by their sympathy and love."³⁷ One of these doctors even chose to accompany Chrysostom on his journey in exile. Chrysostom was familiar with what a doctor could offer to treat the body physically. He also had

³⁵ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 32.

³⁶ Robert Payne, *The Fathers of the Eastern Church* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), 197.

³⁷ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 37.

access to these doctors and could have asked for their input on Olympias's physical problems and, if he thought necessary, her despondency.

In addition to Chrysostom's own personal need for medical care, he told Olympias of the importance of caring for her physical health. In addition, Chrysostom makes clear that he saw her current physical problems as a result of her despondency, not the other way around. Responding to what Olympias had written, Chrysostom replies:

...you have confessed this yourself, if you do not free yourself from this infirmity, we will not believe that you have been delivered from despondency. For if this [despondency] is indeed the cause of your illness, just as you have written to us, it is very evident that if one is removed the other will be terminated with it...³⁸

But as a prescription for Olympias's despondency, Chrysostom continued to encourage her to deal with it in a spiritual manner.

Beyond the interconnectedness of the despondency causing physical problems, Chrysostom told Olympias to take proper care of her physical body. Referring to 1 Timothy 5:23, Chrysostom recognized that there is a proper role for physical health and treatment of illness. Chrysostom writes, "But do not therefore either desire your end or neglect your health; for that is not safe. Therefore Paul heartily advises Timothy to take the greatest care of himself."³⁹

Chrysostom also recognized maladies aside from despondency that can affect the cognitive abilities of a person. In his thirteenth letter to Olympias, Chrysostom urged her to find joy in her present circumstances. He noted that if one weeps, it should be for those perpetrating the evils that are causing her suffering, because of the coming Judgment Day. And in the course of this letter, Chrysostom contrasted these culprits with those that are experiencing mania.⁴⁰ Chrysostom writes:

³⁸ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 167-68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁰ Rather than 'mania,' or some alternative translation, David Ford used the term 'mental illness.' Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 139. However, within this translation he uses the term 'mania' synonymously to 'mental illness.' This may be to distinguish between two different words used by Chrysostom. Ford made a translation decision to read a modern term back into the text when, in this case, it brings connotations that John would not have considered. The translation

For they are just like those possessed by mental illness – who kick and strike those who approach them, randomly and vainly, even often those who are their benefactors and friends, not recognizing the mania that possesses them. Therefore their illness is incurable, for they neither do allow doctors to approach, nor do they take medicine; but rather they treat in a contrary way those who wish to heal and benefit them.⁴¹

This shows the extent of Chrysostom's familiarity with the medical community of his day and even recognizing a physical issue affecting the mind that he believed needed medical treatment.

Beyond the letters to Olympias, Chrysostom acknowledged that medicine could be a benefit to those struggling with physical maladies. For example, in a homily from Colossians, illustrating Colossians 3:15, he compared the necessity of precision in Christian care of the soul to that in medical care of the body. He writes, “Tell me, if a physician should come to one, and, neglecting the remedies belonging to his art, should use incantation, should we call that man a physician? By no means...”⁴² In addition, of Stageirios in *Ad Stagirium*, Thuminger and Singer note:

by Ford is preserved in the quotation. Let the reader be aware of this translation decision made by Ford. Wendy Mayer makes a more detailed yet similar argument as Ford. Wendy Mayer, “The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8 (2015): 337-51. She sees John Chrysostom’s final letter to Olympias and another, final letter to his extensive followers as falling into the category of a medico-philosophical treatise. Yet John saw himself as prescribing biblical care for the soul, and modern definitions and constructs of mental illness did not exist. It seems Mayer, too, is reading modern categories back into the writings of Chrysostom. For example, writing about John’s view of sin, she notes, “In John’s psychology the mindset ($\gamma\gamma\omega\mu\eta$) is the critical faculty responsible for moral error (that is, sin). In this respect, as Laird has shown, he draws on a long Hellenistic tradition (both Christian and non-Christian) and is informed by the same paideia that shaped the views of his compatriot at Antioch, the teacher of rhetoric, Libanius. In this view, sin or moral error is conceived of as a pathological state (a sickness of the psyche), a genuine mental illness that differs from other mental illnesses precisely in respect to personal agency or choice.” Mayer, “The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy,” 343. As will be shown, John was looking through a biblical lens of sin and the mind.

⁴¹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 139.

⁴² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. Ashworth and John Albert Broadus, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 298.

He makes no reference to any possibility that Stageirios's suffering could be a natural illness or that medical treatment could have been attempted, despite the fact that doctors and medicine are mentioned frequently throughout the rest of the document to illustrate divine or ideal human action.⁴³

Graeco-Roman Medicinal Practices and Despondency

Another possible explanation for John Chrysostom's non-medical view of despondency is that the Roman world would not have typically regarded despondency as a physical illness either. At the time of Chrysostom, the Graeco-Roman Hippocratic theory of humors, made popular by Galen, was prevalent.⁴⁴ This theory understood that the body contained four visible liquids that, when out of balance, caused physical problems. And, as David Healy notes, "These humors had corresponding elements, which were also visible and potentially testable."⁴⁵

Examining the question of despondency in the letters to Olympias, Chrysostom made clear that it affects the body. However, he does not make the case that despondency is caused by an imbalance of these humors. Neither Chrysostom nor Olympias claimed that her despondency is caused by her physical body. Chrysostom could easily have encouraged her to go to a physician to see if a physical malady was causing her despondency rather than focus upon her spiritual state. As Healy states elsewhere of physicians of the ancient world:

The texts of Galen and Hippocrates make clear that physicians in antiquity often described diseases, and even mental disorders, that can be recognized today, but they did so on the basis of visible appearances of the disorder – the swelling, heat, and redness of a tumor, the smell of urine, the mute rigidity of stupor, the frenzy of delirium. These were not diseases based on what the affected subject reported about some inner mental state.⁴⁶

⁴³ Thuminger and Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, 90.

⁴⁴ David Healy, *Mania: A Short History of Bipolar Disorder* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 3-10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ Healy, *Mania*, 12.

David Ford, while missing the necessity of biblical transformation through the treatment Chrysostom prescribes from God's Word, sees Olympias's struggle not as an issue of a physical malady but as a cognitive one, writing, "This emphasis on proper thinking as the key to getting out of – and staying out of – despondency/despair/depression is the hallmark of the widespread clinical approach in modern psychotherapy known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)."⁴⁷

The picture that emerges is that Chrysostom understood medical practices of his day and did not believe that the medical community offered any real means of dealing with the root of despondency. He saw it as a spiritual problem. J.N.D. Kelly could quibble that the ancient world had no treatment for despondency. However, John was certain that despondency was a spiritual issue and that God's Word was the proper prescription. And if despondency is a spiritual malady, no physical treatment, whether ancient or modern, would provide help.

The Issue of Chrysostom's Temperament

As mentioned earlier, Kelly also claimed, "John was temperamentally unsuited to enter sympathetically...."⁴⁸ While Chrysostom is at times firm in directing Olympias to cast aside despondency,⁴⁹ he recognized the depths to which despondency could take a person⁵⁰ and expressed great care and love for Olympias.⁵¹ In one of Chrysostom's most tender appeals to Olympias, it is apparent that he cared deeply for her and that he is firm in his belief that his spiritual prescriptions are exactly what she needs. He writes:

What, therefore shall we say about these things? That certainly it is possible for you, in my absence, to have fellowship with me through my books. And we will make haste, if we can locate couriers, to send you numerous, long letters. But if you desire to hear my living voice, perhaps this is possible, and we will see each other again, God willing – or rather, not 'perhaps,' but surely, without a doubt! For now, I will remind you I have not said these things rashly – neither have I

⁴⁷ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 22.

⁴⁸ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

⁴⁹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

beguiled you, nor made a miscalculation – but that you may hear my living through my letters.⁵²

Spiritual Direction or Ancient CBT?

As raised previously, David Ford saw what Chrysostom offered Olympias as an ancient form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).⁵³ While it is true that Chrysostom was concerned with the mind, we must consider if what he prescribed is uniquely biblical or more closely associated with modern behavioral science, specifically the methodology of CBT.

In examining anxiety and treatments of anxiety, Gary Collins briefly summarizes CBT as, "...helping people to change the way they think and/or change their behavior."⁵⁴ Based solely upon that brief definition, it would seem that a biblical approach to such problems is similar to CBT.⁵⁵ Ford mentioned CBT briefly in

⁵² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 78.

⁵³ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 22. Beyond the scope of this paper, Wendy Mayer made an argument similar to Ford that Chrysostom was more influenced by his Greek philosophical background and that he should be viewed in terms of "medico-philosophical psychic therapy." Wendy Mayer, "Shaping the Sick Soul: Reshaping the Identity of John Chrysostom," in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies inspired by Pauline Allen*, eds. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 140. Yet to say that his philosophy was informed by them does not consider properly Chrysostom's negative view of Greek philosophy that was expressed especially vehemently in his later writings, with his letters to Olympias being near the end of his life. While it must be acknowledged that Chrysostom was influenced in technique by his Greek education, J.N.D. Kelly notes, "...[I]t remains true that his earlier writings reveal that he had gained at school first-rate working knowledge of the most admired authors of the classical period and regularly looks to them as models....This legacy of his boyhood education is all the more striking in the view of the deeply critical attitude which, as we shall discover, he was to develop towards Hellenistic culture....Libanios [Chrysostom's primary teacher] was dying and his friends inquired who should succeed him in his chair of rhetoric, he answered, 'It ought to have been John had not the Christians stolen him from us.'" Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 8. In addition, Chrysostom received further training and examination in theology in the Antiochian Church, especially under Bishop Meletius and Bishop Flavian. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 14-71. While further engagement could be done with Mayer's argument, it seems she is looking at Chrysostom's writing style, not considering the context of his world and the known opposition Chrysostom had to ideas of Greek philosophy.

⁵⁴ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 151.

⁵⁵ For further critiques of CBT in comparison to biblical counseling see Heath Lambert, *A Biblical Theology of Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 97-98 and the interview of David Powlison in Ryan Howes, "The Varieties of Religious Therapy: Biblical Counseling – Biblical Counseling According to David Powlison," *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201110/the-varieties-religious-therapy-biblical-counseling>.

passing. He may have had a very general definition in mind. However, to use such a term in a broad sense generalizes the method of care Chrysostom prescribed for Olympias and may conflate two different theories of care. Therefore, we need to consider if Chrysostom is prescribing something similar to CBT and if there is any difference between it and a biblical prescription of care if the classical pastoral tradition is to be considered.

In their critique of cognitive therapies, Jones and Butman note that cognitive therapy is born out of behaviorism, which is anti-Christian and materialistic at a foundational level.⁵⁶ They note, “Materialism denies the existence of the spiritual realm and posits matter is all that matters.”⁵⁷ This materialistic worldview naturally leads to a lack of absolute truth. As Jones and Butman note further, it holds to a “functional relativism” and that, “In most forms of cognitive therapy, the veracity of a client’s thoughts are evaluated based on slippery relativistic criteria that are selected because they bring about enhanced mood and functioning.”⁵⁸

Chrysostom’s writings are permeated with discussion of God, God’s interaction in human lives, and a future eternity that awaits those beyond this life. For example, in Letter fourteen, Chrysostom saw, “...God generally governs the affairs of men.”⁵⁹ At a foundational level, Chrysostom does not hold to the same philosophical commitments as CBT.

While there may be similarities in Chrysostom’s writing to some of CBT’s techniques, it would be a far stretch to say that these similarities would mean he is practicing an ancient form of CBT.⁶⁰ Rather, however different its foundation may be from Scripture, through common grace CBT may have landed upon a technique similar to what we find apparent in Scripture, namely, addressing the mind and behavior in the process of the care of souls.

⁵⁶ Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 207.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 147.

⁶⁰ In regards to technique, Jay Adams writes, “Technique is, to put it simply, skill...A biblical technique is one that is commanded in the Scriptures (cf. Colossians 4:5, 6 above), commended in the Scriptures (cf. III John 5, 6), or grows out of a scriptural principle. There is no counseling apart from technique. You cannot avoid it; the minute you open your mouth you are using technique.” Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 98-99.

However, to note the least common denominator in how CBT and Scripture may similarly address the mind in general, broad-stroke technique is insufficient. Scripture offers a very different view of humanity as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28); as living in a fallen world (Genesis 3); that humanity's primary problem is sin (Romans 5:12-14); that our ultimate need is salvation through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15-21); and that change must occur according to the standard set by God, affecting both the inner and outer man (Ephesians 4:17-24). In CBT's materialistic worldview that denies the supernatural, very little exists internally for man; there is no goal for change beyond the relativistic goals of an individual or society; and CBT is largely amoral in what it has to offer. This radically changes the prescription that CBT would offer in comparison to Scripture. To read ideas of CBT back into Chrysostom's writings rather than concluding that CBT has discovered an element of truth in the natural world would mischaracterize Chrysostom's approach to despondency. Like Chrysostom, CBT recognizes the important role that our thoughts and beliefs contribute to our actions; however, CBT misses Chrysostom's all-important spiritual goal of basing our thoughts and beliefs in the truths of Scripture, leading to thoughts and actions that please the Lord.

CHRYSTOSSTOM'S SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE FOR OLYMPIAS'S DESPONDENCY

Having examined John Chrysostom's understanding of despondency as a spiritual malady, we turn our attention to examining Chrysostom's prescription for Olympias's despondency. Just as the diagnosis was spiritual, so was the prescription. Chrysostom clearly saw that the way out of despondency is intentional meditation upon biblical truths that can transform the mind and conquer despondency.

A Survey of Chrysostom's Direction to Olympias

In the first six letters, Chrysostom briefly engages with Olympias's despondency. In letter four, he states that she can conquer despondency with reason found in wisdom and understanding of Scripture.⁶¹ In letter five, he offers thoughts that may aid her in fighting despondency. First, to alleviate Olympias's worry for him, Chrysostom tells her of the "fellow-sufferers" physically present with

⁶¹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 36.

him and how they are “abiding in health, in freedom from fear, in great inner stillness.”⁶² He then calls Olympias to meditate upon the temporal nature of this life, asserting that these thoughts would keep her from fixating on concerns of this world and that, instead, she should be burdened for the eternal state of those causing suffering.⁶³ Letter six recounts difficulties Chrysostom himself faced. Regarding her despondency, he mentions he delayed in writing, “lest I make you [Olympias] greatly sorrowful.”⁶⁴

Letter seven has an extended discourse on Olympias’s despondency. In this letter, Chrysostom uses the analogy of one navigating a ship, noting that, one has hope because God is “governing everything,” and reminds her that the only thing to fear is sin.⁶⁵ With these two concepts in mind, Chrysostom reminds Olympias that this world is temporal. He recognizes that she is busy, trying to make things better by going to various people. Yet he calls her to “beseech God” and reminds her that while God often does not work quickly, “when there remains almost nothing that has not been ravaged by the evils of the enemies, then all at once he changes everything to tranquility and leads things to unexpected stability.”⁶⁶ He gives the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego at the fiery furnace and how God met them in a similar fashion. Chrysostom moves to giving further examples of God’s longsuffering in the death of Jesus (and release of Barabbas), showing that Jesus’s life was a constant war. He mentions that one would think this a scandal [stumbling block] yet “...the truth was not obscured, but shone forth all the more brightly.”⁶⁷ Chrysostom then closes, pointing Olympias to the strength of the Church in the death of Stephen and calling her to trust God who is working mightily in their present circumstances.

In letter eight, Chrysostom reminds Olympias that if she does not deal with her despondency, it will lead to greater problems. He tells her, “I know the greatness of your intelligence, and the power of your Christian way of thinking [philosophia] which alone is sufficient to command the madness of your despair to be cast into

⁶² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 39.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 53.

the sea, making everything calm.”⁶⁸ Chrysostom acknowledges there is mutual suffering in the church yet calls her to “set a limit to your grief.”⁶⁹ He looks at the example of the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 7 and how, when he repented, Paul did not want him to continue in grief over sin. Chrysostom then calls Olympias to meditate on the Judgement Day when these instigators of persecution will be judged for their evils and Olympias will receive great rewards.⁷⁰ He then recounts, in detail, numerous of her virtues and tells her to meditate upon all the ways she has joyously served Christ in the past as a means of overcoming despondency. He acknowledges how painful it is to be separated from her and shows this is natural, as it was for Paul in being separated from Titus (2 Corinthians 2:12-23) and Paul’s sadness in being separated from the Macedonians, emphasizing his use of the word ‘orphaned’.⁷¹

In letter nine Chrysostom retells recent hardships he faced. In regards to Olympias’s despondency, he notes that she is doing “the devil’s will by increasing [her] despondency and grief.”⁷² He tells her he has sent two letters that contained Scriptural direction, “sufficient to revive anyone in despondency, anyone scandalized, and to lead them to complete restoration of spirit.”⁷³ Chrysostom encourages Olympias to review them regularly and that he grieves because of her sin.⁷⁴

In letter ten, Chrysostom makes a transition in the way he is ministering to Olympias in her despondency. He notes:

For if we have destroyed your despondency and demolished its stronghold throughout previous letters, it is now needful to take further care of you through these words, in order to establish in you a profound peace, and having utterly blotted out every memory of that disturbance, for you to show forth a luminous and steadfast serenity, being secured in great joy.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 58.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁷¹ Ibid., 80.

⁷² Ibid., 92.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 97.

He speaks at length about how dangerous despondency is, how God allowed the Israelites to have despondent hearts, noting the examples of Elijah, Jonah, David, Job, and Lazarus who struggled at some point with despondency and saw it was worse than death.⁷⁶

Chrysostom then looks at Paul's thoughts on despondency, noting, "If, therefore, sufferings have great rewards, and despair is the most grievous and most painful of all sufferings, imagine what will be recompense for it!"⁷⁷ In this context Chrysostom is speaking of the wrestle with despondency, not giving in to it, separating the two. He notes how despondency can be used for good, as it was with Nebuchadnezzar, when he saw suffering and then praised God. Also, Chrysostom notes how God used Paul's own thorn in the flesh to reward Paul greatly in his continued perseverance in suffering.

Chrysostom gives an extended discourse, concerning Joseph who, despite the misery of his circumstances, never gave in to despondency. Concluding these examples, and the life of Joseph in particular, Chrysostom notes, "So it is that God allows arenas to remain, not to abandon anyone to the end but to provide a way for those desiring so to excel in virtue..."⁷⁸ Throughout the letter, Chrysostom calls Olympias to ponder and meditate upon these things as a means to overcome despondency and find joy in their common plight.

In letter eleven, Chrysostom notes that Olympias's circumstances have gotten worse, yet she is doing better in her despondency. He then uses Job to teach her about growth in suffering, describing how Satan will increase hardship to try to break a person and yet, "...while even then the devil did not cease his attacks, they were turning upon his own head – just as your situation is becoming more brilliant, grander, and more radiant every day.... Our enemies have actually strengthened us...."⁷⁹ He then encourages her to continue to rejoice in these things.

In letter twelve, Chrysostom notes that Olympias has struggled physically, almost to the point of death. Throughout the letter he commends the way she has viewed this suffering, noting, "So now, I rejoice greatly and am glad, not

⁷⁶ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 103.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

only for your deliverance from illness, but more than everything, for the way you nobly bore everything that befell you..."⁸⁰ Letter thirteen continues with a similar tone, that Olympias is rejoicing and has overcome despondency. Chrysostom encourages her to continue to rejoice and notes that the persecution she is suffering has actually become a source of joy. Although, he warns her that despondency will itself become a punishment. The letter ends with a statement that Olympias still has some struggle. Chrysostom writes, "What, therefore, are you afraid of? What are you troubled about, when you are working yourself up to despise even life itself, should that moment come? But do you desire to see the dissolution of the evils that afflict you? This will come – yes, it will come quickly, as God permits."⁸¹ He then tells her to remain hopeful that they will see each other again.

Letter fourteen is brief and speaks to increased hardship that has been alleviated for Olympias. He tells her not to cry over these hardships but to rejoice because she is freed from them and will receive reward for them. Chrysostom notes that she stood under this trial with great strength and commends her, for, "you are showing forth great intelligence, long-suffering, endurance, and patience, while demonstrating the complete accuracy of your understanding."⁸²

Letter fifteen is also brief and gives an update on Chrysostom's situation as he is facing increased hardship. In letter sixteen, Chrysostom speaks of trials and how they spiritually purify those enduring them. He hopes they will not continue for Olympias, yet he is encouraged by her continued virtue. He notes, "For having been trained in the 'gymnasia' [through enduring previous trials], you are handling these present contexts with great ease."⁸³

In the seventeenth and final letter, Olympias is struggling both spiritually and physically because of despondency. It may be because of the increased hardship that Chrysostom is facing. Chrysostom writes to her, "But if you say that your maladies are the result of your despondency, why do you still seek letters from us, if they have not contributed to your happiness – and if indeed you have been plunged under the tyranny of despair to such an extent that you now wish to

⁸⁰ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 132.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 156.

depart from this life?”⁸⁴ He reminds her of his previous instruction and, using the examples of Paul and Job, tells Olympias she must be patient in her trial. He writes:

In considering all of this, drive away the despondency that now envelopes you...I have sent you what I wrote recently on the topic that ‘no one can harm the one who does not injure himself.’ That discourse I am now sending Your Excellency fights the same battle. Therefore, it is needful for you to read through it constantly. And if you are healthy enough, read it aloud. For it will be a medicine sufficient for you, if you wish it to be.⁸⁵

Chrysostom tells her not to write long letters if they will not help her fight despondency. He notes that it is up to her to fight it or she will be drowned in it.

As shown through the above survey of Chrysostom’s writing to Olympias on despondency, Chrysostom clearly saw the struggle she was having in spiritual terms. We also see that he understood that the place in which the Christian fights despondency is the mind. Meditation upon a Scriptural understanding of circumstances will not only lift one out of despondency but bring joy. Knowing God and how he is working beyond any circumstances one faced in life is a hope to the one who has a promised eternity with God. Chrysostom sees Olympias’s giving in to despondency as sin and declares that it will overwhelm her if she does not intentionally and regularly meditate upon the truths of God’s Word that will transform her understanding of her current circumstances.⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

As raised in the introduction of this paper, Thomas Oden proposed that there

⁸⁴ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸⁶ Robert G.T. Edwards makes a similar claim in his “Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias”. However, Edwards believes that, “Chrysostom provides a narrative ‘deep structure,’ taken from specific biblical narratives, whereby one might cultivate a healthy emotional response in the midst of suffering.” Edwards, “Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias,” 5. He sees this as a therapeutic pattern that John utilizes in these letters.

is much to learn from the classic tradition of pastoral care. He examined the work of Gregory the Great's *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, showing its contemporary relevance. The goal of this paper was to examine this theory in the writings of John Chrysostom's *Letters to Olympia*. As has been shown, Chrysostom believed that meditation upon the deep truths of God's Word brought a transformation of mind that could take one from despondency to joy in spite of circumstances.

In Oden's original examination of Gregory the Great, he notes:

The task that lies ahead is the development of a postmodern, post-Freudian, neoclassical approach to Christian pastoral care that takes seriously the resources of modernity while also penetrating the illusions and, having found the best of modern psychotherapies still problematic, has turned again to the classical tradition for its bearings, yet without disowning what it has learned from modern clinical experience.⁸⁷

In his work, Oden also showed similarities between Gregory the Great and modern psychotherapy, finding a common ground in some practices between the two, yet he also notes that Scripture cannot be separated from pastoral care.⁸⁸ Oden then notes the way one can utilize classic works for pastoral care, "One best prepares for pastoral counsel by meditating often on scripture and the patristic writers."⁸⁹

However, examination of the classical Christian pastoral tradition should be taken a step further. While there can be much gained from examining classic pastoral works, we can also learn from them how to approach Scripture. Pastors and ministry workers are not merely learning a technique of how to treat spiritual maladies as a medical doctor would to treat the physical body. They should be seeking out those in the classic pastoral tradition that recognized the importance of engaging God in the process, convinced that God alone can bring radical, spiritual transformation.

⁸⁷ Oden, *Care of Souls in Classic Tradition*, 37.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 66.

For example, in *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom was not merely using a technique to alleviate symptoms, but rather believed that through consistent meditation upon and application of God's Word, Olympias could experience internal transformation. This understanding should transform the way we understand the classical tradition of Christian pastoral care. It is not merely reading vocabulary of CBT back into the ministry of men like John Chrysostom or Gregory the Great. It should be a call to examine the writings of those who are committed to God and his Word, depending upon God and utilizing meditation upon His Word as a means for God to bring transformation of the soul. Because it is in God, through His Word that we find true transformation and hope, both in this life and the next.