

PSALMS 42-43

HOPE FOR THE DOWNCAST SOUL

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 7, 2010

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.
(Psa 42:5-6).

The book of Psalms is precious to Christians as our companion in the spiritual walk of faith. The psalms take us by the hand and guide believers in our communion with God through all the varied scenes of life. These are songs of the heart that God himself teaches us to sing: songs of joy, songs of pain, songs of fear, and songs of faith. In these inspired poems we find the full range of human emotions opened before the heart of God in settings familiar to our experience. John Calvin commented: “What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to find words to describe... I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately, *an anatomy of all parts of the soul*; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”¹

Book 2 of the Psalms, comprising Psalms 42-72, is distinctive for its variety of authors, including the eight psalms written by “the Sons of Korah.” This was a clan of Levites who were employed in the sacred music of the temple. They also kept the temple gates and were guardians of the ark of the covenant. This seems to explain their frequent expressions of devotion to the temple courts as the place where God’s face was seen. The Korahite motto is expressed in Psalm 84:10: “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand

¹ Cited from Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 13.

elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” The fact that Book 2 begins with eight psalms from the Sons of Korah suggest a focus in this collection on communion with God, especially as experienced in the liturgical life of the tabernacle and temple.

A final note about the Sons of Korah is that their namesake was one of the villains of the Old Testament. During the exodus from Egypt, Korah led a rebellion of 250 leaders against Moses and was slain by God’s judgment (Numbers 16). Numbers 26:11 points out, however, that “the sons of Korah did not die,” which suggests that they refused to follow in their father’s rebellion. This fact reminds us that ungodly parents can produce godly children and that no child is disqualified from serving God because of the sins of his or her parents. Moreover, their awareness of God’s grace in employing them in sacred service despite their family’s disgrace may account in part for the intense fervor for God expressed in the psalms of the Sons of Korah.

FAR FROM GOD

Scholars are widely agreed that Psalms 42 and 43 were most likely a single original composition. Psalm 43 is the only one of the psalms ascribed to the Sons of Korah to lack a superscription, which suggests that it was originally the concluding portion of Psalm 42. This perhaps explains why a large number of ancient texts combine the two psalms as one. Moreover, Psalm 43 repeats the refrain of Psalm 42, “Why are you cast down, O my soul...” and seems to fit as the final section of a unified composition. This combined poem is a song of lament from a temple servant whose heart is downcast over his separation from the presence of God.

The psalmist’s chief complaint, his longing for fellowship with God, is expressed by a vivid simile: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1). A thirsty deer will search until it finds a source of water, and then it will cast itself into the stream to drink. The psalmist, distressed by a dry soul that is distant from God, thirsts for the life that he is missing: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:2). God is the source of life and his salvation is often described in Scripture as living waters. Like a deer that drinks deeply from the refreshing stream, the psalmist

knows that through fellowship with God the vigor will return to his spirit. The divine presence is not a luxury but a necessity to his existence.

As we might expect from a Korahite, who were Levitical singers, communion with God is associated here with the liturgy of the temple. “When shall I come and appear before God?” he asks (Ps. 42:2). It seems that the psalmist has been forced to be absent from Jerusalem and the temple courts. “I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar,” he complains (Ps. 42:6).

We do not know the exact location, but the psalmist places himself generally in the region beyond the Jordan to the north and east, located around the Mount Hermon range of mountains. “Mizar” means “little hill,” so he may be located atop one of the lesser mounts near Mount Hermon, at the northern end of Israel, 130 miles from Jerusalem. This is one of the last points from which one can glimpse the hills around the holy city while journeying north. Commentators thus suggest that the psalmist might be among the Jews being led into exile in Bablyon. Alternatively, King David crossed the Jordan in this region while fleeing from his rebel son, Absalom, so some have wondered if the psalmist was one of the Levites in David’s company. Whatever the cause of his separation, this psalm may be expressing “his ‘last sigh’ before [the temple] vanished forever from his sight.”²

While enduring this forced absence from the temple courts, the psalmist pines over his memories of the sacred assemblies: “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival” (Ps. 42:4). Many Christians have had the experience of moving to a place where they cannot find a church with reverent, joyful, and rich worship. Their longing for strong biblical preaching becomes almost a physical craving, like a deer panting for streams of water. The memory of earlier times when they reveled in the congregation, like the ancient Israelite festivals in “the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise,” only makes their desire more palpable. So it was for this Korahite who was forced to be absent from the house of the Lord.

² J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms, 2 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1878, reprint, 1976), 1:347.

The homesickness that we feel when we are unable to join fellow believers for worship should remind us of the greater alienation from God that is caused by sin. The 18th century preacher George Horne notes from Psalm 42: “the Christian pilgrim cannot but bewail his exile from the heavenly Jerusalem, out of which sin hath driven him, and doomed him to wander, for a while, in the vale of misery. Led, by repentance and faith, to look back to the place from whence he is fallen, he sighs after the unspeakable joys of the celestial Zion; longing to keep a festival, and celebrate a jubilee in heaven; to join in the song of angels, and bear a part in the music of hallelujahs.”³

The psalm’s opening stanza makes an important point about worship. The psalmist speaks of missing the liturgy and the spiritual excitement of the temple and its festivals. Yet his heart is truly yearning for God himself. William Plumer comments from this that “truly pious men were never satisfied with the ordinances of God without the God of the ordinances.”⁴ The psalmist’s longing, though stirred by the memory of worship services, is directed toward God himself.

Psalm 42 reminds us that true spirituality expresses itself in a longing for God. Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3). Christianity is not a religion that merely consists in knowledge of doctrines, important as doctrines are; it is quite possible to know the Bible well, yet live a worldly life if we are not thirstily pursuing God himself. C. S. Lewis once complained that the problem with people is not that they demand too much but that they settle for too little.⁵ So it is for the Christian who does not seek personally to know and enjoy God. Augustine explained our need for God in the famous prayer of his *Confessions*: “Thou hast created us for thyself, and our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in thee.”⁶

This opening exclamation of Psalm 42 challenges us greatly in a time when Christians seem more interested in the benefits of the Christian lifestyle than in the glory of communion with God. Do you have a passion for God? Do you realize that the true purpose of your life is the pleasure and glory of the Lord, and that the highest possession you

³ George Horne, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Audobon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1771, reprint 1997), 190.

⁴ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1867, reprint, 1975), 495.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan, 1949, reprint 1980), 3-4.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. G.P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1912), I.I.

could ever attain is spiritual communion with God? When we come to church are we aware that we are coming into God's presence and that the elements of worship are of value only as they fix our hearts on him?

If we have a heart that seeks after God we will be increasingly immune to the allure of the world and our lives will bear the holy marks of his likeness. Our growth as Christians and our enjoyment of the blessings that God gives is ultimately dependent on our thirsting for God as a deer pants for flowing streams. Since most of us know little of this great spiritual reality, the words of William Cowper's hymn should enter into our prayers:

O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heav'nly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb.⁷

THE DOWNCAST SOUL

The psalmist proves that the most godly believers can go through times of spiritual distress. Martyn Lloyd-Jones chronicled this reality in his book *Spiritual Depression*. He said: "Christian people too often seem to be perpetually in the doldrums and too often give this appearance of unhappiness and of lack of freedom and absence of joy." This is one reason, he added, "why large numbers of people have ceased to be interested in Christianity."⁸ The question raised even by Christians was expressed in the title of Erma Bombeck's book, *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I Living in the Pits?*

The answer of Psalm 42 is that life is not a bowl of cherries. The psalmist details a number of reasons he is depressed, in addition to his separation from God. One reason is that he suffers the taunts of his enemies: "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?" (Ps. 42:3). The author is grieved deeply in his spirit, hardly able to eat because of his sorrow.

⁷ William Cowper, "O for a Closer Walk with God," 1769.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 12.

Apparently some mocked that God had abandoned him: “As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Ps. 42:10).

These are taunts that Christians will hear when we go through troubles in life. Unbelieving neighbors or co-workers may compound our distress when we lose a job, suffer an illness, or experience any number of life’s myriad woes. “What good is your religion anyway?” they may revile. Job’s wife spat into that godly but afflicted man’s teeth: “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). We can easily imagine how such mocking depressed this psalmist who was separated from the temple. Spurgeon writes: “The wicked know that our worst misfortune would be to lose God’s favour, hence their diabolical malice leads them to declare that such is the case.”⁹ Satan, knowing he cannot destroy God’s children, often uses such taunts to discourage and torment believers; anticipating his strategy, Christians should be alert to the danger of allowing such mockery to depress our spirits.

The psalmist was faced not only with taunts, however, but was oppressed with malicious assaults. “Vindicate me, O God,” he cries, “and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!” (Ps. 43:1). He has been attacked unjustly, just as everyone who tries to live a God-honoring life will sometimes be unjustly maligned or mistreated. Paul said, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The oppression is so great that the writer feels overwhelmed by his trials. He expresses this in verse seven, saying, “Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.” He is in the region where the headwaters of the Jordan roar in the canyons, and the sound of raging waters from the deep reminds him of the troubles that are pouring over his head.

This leads to a third cause of his distress, his fear that God really has abandoned him: “I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” (Ps. 42:9). Here is an example of the honesty that makes the book of Psalms such a help to God’s people. The psalm writers pour out their hearts, admitting their doubts, fears, and complaints against God;

⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), I:2:271.

realizing this encourages us to authenticity in our prayer lives. God knows how we are feeling, and a step in recovering ourselves spiritually is to express ourselves honestly and openly to God. At the same time, the psalmist calls upon God as “my rock,” reminding us to unburden our hearts in an attitude of faith.

HOPE IN GOD

Psalm 42 is valuable not only in depicting spiritual depression but also in showing the biblical way to deal with a downcast heart.

We see this in the refrain that occurs three times: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5-6).

Lloyd-Jones comments on the way the psalmist directly confronts his doubting and depressed spirit: “This man was not content just to lie down and commiserate with himself. He does something about it, he takes himself in hand.”¹⁰ The psalmist challenges his poor state of mind, asking, “Why are you cast down, O my soul.” Lloyd-Jones points out that whereas the man’s depressed heart had been talking to him and dictating his attitude, he now talks to his heart and begins dictating to it. “The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself,” he writes. “You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down’ – what business have you to be disquieted?”¹¹ In this way, Spurgeon says, “His faith reasons with his fears, his hope argues with his sorrows.”¹²

It is important to recognize *what* the psalmist preached to his soul, because we must not seek to address our depression with false remedies. He does not say, “Don’t worry, everything will be all right,” or “You can handle it.” These are ways that the world seeks to overcome its depression. But the Christian argues not his or her own virtue and not the goodness of the world, neither of which are true. Instead, the Christian regains his footing by preaching the truth about

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 1:2, 272.

God to himself. The psalmist says to his soul, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:6).

First, the psalmist encourages himself with his knowledge of God as a mighty Savior. He describes God as his Rock (42:9), as a refuge into which he can run (43:2), and as “God my exceeding joy” (43:4). Here we see the great value of knowing the attributes of God. The sovereign God is unfazed by all the powers of the world arrayed against his people. God is faithful and steadfast in deliverance. When we appeal to God we obtain almighty help that is undaunted by any dangers in this world. Plumer writes, “The more terrible the storm, the more necessary is the anchor.”¹³ Regaining his courage with the truths that he knows about God, the psalmist commands his soul, “Hope in God.”

Second, the psalmist preaches God’s sovereign grace to his downcast soul: “By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life” (Ps. 42:8). This expression that God “commands his steadfast love” is a marvelous truth. God’s saving mercy does not operate according to its own fickle fancy but goes forth at God’s command. Since God has promised mercy to those who call on him through Jesus Christ, then God’s grace for the believer is as certain as the fixed order of the seasons. God has covenanted himself to save and uphold all who believe in his Son, and God commands his steadfast love in accordance with his sovereign promises in Christ. This is why in addition to knowing the attributes of God, Christians are able to encourage their downcast hearts if they know and memorize the promises of God in Scripture. An example is Jesus’ promise: “this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:40). Spurgeon writes: “No day shall ever dawn on an heir of grace and find him altogether forsaken of his Lord: the Lord reigneth, and as a sovereign he will with authority command mercy to be reserved for his chosen.”¹⁴ Armed with the truth of sovereign grace, you must “remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do.”¹⁵

¹³ Plumer, *Psalms*, 503.

¹⁴ Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 275.

¹⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 21.

Lastly, the psalmist preaches to his heart the great value of the means of grace God has provided to his people. He appeals, “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God” (Ps. 43:3-4). This is the call of the distressed Christian who opens the Bible and avails himself of the light of God’s Word. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” David said (Ps. 119:105). The psalmist pleads with his heart to anticipate a return to God’s courts; we, too, can remind our downcast hearts that our prayers in Christ’s name will enter God’s presence. As the psalmist spoke of going to God’s altar with joy, we should preach to our hearts, “Go to the ministry of God’s Word, seek the altar of grace in prayer, and look forward again to gathering with God’s people for worship.” In this way, even in a depressing world, Christians may take our hearts in hand and speaking truths about the saving grace awaiting us through God’s Word and prayer.

PSALM 42 AND THE CROSS

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus applied words from verse 6 to his own distressed spirit, when he said to the disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mt. 26:38). Jesus’ experience is one more proof that Christians should not be ashamed to admit a distressed soul. It may at first discourage us to see that even God’s Son was overcome with grief. But the Gospels tell us that the Savior entered into our sorrows in order to deliver us from them. Earlier on the day of his arrest, Jesus also spoke from Psalm 42, saying, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (Jn. 12:27). We do not know what caused the writer of Psalm 42 to be far from God but we know why Jesus endured a bitter alienation from communion with his Father. Jesus suffered a separation from the Father greater than the distance from Mount Hermon to Jerusalem, and suffered a raging torment more violent than the waters churning in the Jordan’s deep canyons, all to deliver us from the judgment of God on our sins. We therefore can joyfully hope for our restoration to the holy courts of heaven because the breach was removed by the cross of Christ.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that “for the joy that was set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Just as his was the downcast sorrow of Psalm 42, so also was his joy of its refrain: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:11). In the darkness of the cross, Jesus rejoiced in the hope of God’s resurrection promise. That is a promise we share, if we have committed our cause to Jesus, who pledges that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Christ’s saving work should lift up our downcast souls in any form of distress: “I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Because of Jesus, God will never forsake us and will raise us up on the last day. This gospel is cause enough for us to say “Why are you cast down O my soul?”

I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon that God’s mercy in accepting the sons of a guilty man like Korah must surely have played a part in their intense fervor to know and serve the Lord. Since God has shown even greater grace for us, sending his own Son to bear and remove the curse of our sin, how much more gratefully ought we to long for communion with him, and how fervently ought we to echo the passion for God expressed in this psalm: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1).