

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

The Idolization Of Feelings

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Psalm 42-43

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 42.

We are in week three of our summer series “The Air We Breathe.” We have been identifying some of the subtle-yet-sinful thought patterns that are prevalent in our culture and that threaten to slip into the church. In week one, I argued that we find biblical warrant for this exercise in Romans 12:1-2 where Paul taught us that right *worship* was inseparably connected to right *thinking*. I could have turned just as easily to 2 Corinthians 10:5 where Paul wrote:

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and **take every thought captive to obey Christ** (2 Corinthians 10:5 ESV)

Paul was consistent with this message: Your mind is a spiritual battlefield.

Of course, if you’ve read your Bible then you know that we can’t win spiritual battles in our own strength. The solution is not simply to *think harder* or to *read more*. We need – and we have – the help of the Holy Spirit. And as He fights for us, He wields:

the sword of the Spirit, **which is the word of God** (Ephesians 6:17b ESV)

Picture it this way: Every time we study a passage it is as if we are putting a sword into the Spirit’s hand to fight more effectively for us and in us against the lies of the evil one.

Because every culture has its lies. Carl Trueman – a brilliant theologian and historian – notes:

Every age has had its darkness and its dangers. The task of the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them.¹

Last week, we focused in on the problem of tribalism. This week, I want to draw your attention to a problem that is far more pervasive. It is dangerously subtle, and terribly destructive. This morning, I want to shine the light of God’s Word on the *idolization of feelings*.

Rene Descartes famously said: “I think, therefore I am.” But our culture is shaped by a different conviction. We live by the motto: “I *feel*, therefore I am.”

There is no greater authority in our culture today than our feelings. “I *feel*” trumps EVERYTHING. It trumps biology. It trumps responsibility. It trumps reason. We have moved feelings into the driver’s seat and the consequences have been disastrous! Carl Trueman observes:

If the inner psychological life of the individual is sovereign, then identity becomes as potentially unlimited as the human imagination.²

Does that sound familiar? There was a viral story that made the rounds this past year about schools that were providing litter boxes for students who identified as animals. But don’t worry, it was a false alarm. In one local newspaper, readers were reassured:

There are students in schools across Renfrew County who identify as animals, although there are no litter boxes in schools.³

That is a *real sentence* in a *real newspaper*. “Don’t believe the rumours! I mean, yes, there *are* several students who believe they are cats, but don’t worry – we still make them use the potty.”

I feel, therefore I am. This is *the idolization of feelings*. This is the air we breathe.

¹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 30.

² Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 50.

³ The Eganville Leader, *Students in Local Schools Identify As Animals But No Litter Boxes Exist* (The Eganville Leader, posted October 18, 2022) <https://www.eganvilleleader.ca/breaking-news/6799/> Accessed July 25, 2023.

But, as I mentioned on week one, the goal of this series is not to whine or to wag a finger at the world *out there*. The goal of this series is to look to God's Word so that we can learn to think rightly *in here*.

To that end, I want to turn your attention the Book of Psalms. In particular, I want to draw your attention to Psalms 42 and 43 which, taken together, constitute one beautiful and powerful song that has been described as:

a case-study in dealing with a downcast spirit.⁴

We will see in this text that the solution to the idolization of feelings is not to deny them or suppress them. God doesn't call us to *delegitimize* our feelings. But He does call us to *deprioritize* them, and to *coach* them when necessary. Look with me now to our passage for this morning where we will find:

A Comforting Song For Our Complicated Feelings

If you look closely at Psalms 42 and 43, you will quickly identify a structure. Look at verses 5 and 11 of Psalm 42 and then look ahead at verse 5 of Psalm 43. What do you notice? It is repeated verbatim!

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. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

In contemporary terms, this is the chorus of the song! It is the unifying thought to which the Psalmist continually returns. In between these three repetitions, then, we find three verses or *stanzas* – no different than the songs that we have been singing this morning.

⁴ A. Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 111.

But what makes *this* song different than the songs we sang earlier is that *this* song was authored by God himself! The Holy Spirit spoke through the Psalmist so that we could learn how to sing when our feelings are a mess.

This morning, we're going to consider the three stanzas and the chorus of this song and then we are going to draw out some simple principles for our complicated feelings. That's the plan, and it requires that we move quickly. Look with me now at Psalm 42:1-4 where we find:

Stanza 1. I feel far from God

Look there with me now:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
⁴ 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. (Psalm 42:1-4 ESV)

We don't know the exact circumstances behind this song, but we DO know that this Psalmist was taken away from Jerusalem and – in particular – from the temple. It is very possible that this Psalmist is one of the exiles that was sent to Babylon.

Whether he was taken there or someplace else, he was far from home and he was heartbroken. He describes himself as a deer panting for water. With dramatic imagery, he says that his tears have become his food. His captors mock him asking “Where is your God?” And all the while, his thoughts keep bringing him back to the sweet memories of when he used to walk with the crowds into the house of God with shouts and songs of praise!

But those memories don't have the power to change anything. In all likelihood, this man never worshipped at the temple again. In fact, if he was one of the Babylonian exiles, then he might have even witnessed the BURNING of the temple.

He was far from home – and for this psalmist, being far from home felt like being far from God. He asks in verse 2:

When shall I come and appear before **God**? (Psalm 42:2b ESV)

Sometimes our circumstances are so devastating that we genuinely feel that there is a real, physical and spiritual distance between us and God.

None of us have lived through a forced exile, but I wonder if anyone in this room has ever felt the distance this Psalmist describes. I can tell you that, during Covid, there were times when I felt this. My circumstances were bleak, I was unable to gather with the church, and in my soul it felt as if I wouldn't be close to God again until I got back to my old circumstances. That wasn't true. God hadn't moved. But it sure *felt* that way.

That feeling is all too common, and this Psalmist was right in the thick of it. But that wasn't all he was feeling. Look ahead at verses 6-10 where we find:

Stanza 2. I feel forgotten by God

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning

because of the oppression of the enemy?”
¹⁰ 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?” (Psalm 42:6b-10 ESV)

Look closely at the contrast between verses 6 and 9:

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore **I remember you** (Psalm 42:6b ESV)

I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?” (Psalm 42:9a ESV)

“God, I’m in misery here, but I REMEMBER You! And yet, you seem to have forgotten me...”

Worse than that, the Psalmist looks at his afflictions and he sees God’s sovereign hand all over them. In verse 7 he says: “all YOUR waves and YOUR breakers are crashing over me.” That’s the trouble with good theology – it makes you deal honestly with reality. If God is sovereign – if God is always, completely in control – then *everything* that happens in life first passes through His fingers.

This Psalmist believes that.

And He also believes that God is faithful and good because he says in verse 8:

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life. (Psalm 42:8 ESV)

Yet all of that truth just made the Psalmist’s circumstances more disorienting. If God IS good, and if God IS sovereign, then why was this Psalmist having to live through hell? Why were God’s waves crashing over his head again and again? Why were the enemies allowed to taunt him? As he wrestled through it all, he found himself saying: “I feel forgotten by God.”

Again, I suspect there are some people in this room who have an idea what that feels like. You remember God. You pray to Him and sing to Him and cry out to Him. But it feels for all the world like He's forgotten you.

This Psalmist was living there. He felt far. He felt forgotten. And, lastly, he sings:

Stanza 3. I feel rejected by God

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!
² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?
Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?
³ Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!
⁴ 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. (Psalm 43:1-4 ESV)

Because we are made in the image of God, He has wired us with a sense of *justice*. We intuitively know – we feel it in our bones – that the bad guy is not supposed to win.

But the bad guy *does* win sometimes, doesn't he? People do terrible things and seem to get away with it. Earthly justice fails. And, when that happens, it's like our feet are swept out from under us.

This Psalmist has been dragged away from his home. He's been mocked. He's been mistreated. He has listened to his captors taunt God Himself! And every bit of evidence seems to suggest that God is going to allow these bad guys to win!

The Psalmist wants nothing more than to overcome his opponents so that he can return to praise God! His motives are pure! Look at verses three and four. He essentially says, "Lead me out of

this mess, God, and I will run straight to the temple! I will worship You! I will give you all the glory!”

And I’m sure that many of you have had this same conversation with God. “Heal me from this disease and I will give You all the praise! Vindicate me in this dispute and You will receive all the glory! Deliver me from this trial and everything will align so perfectly! Look, God! Don’t You see it! Can’t You see how RIGHT this will be if You would just intervene?”

But the Psalmist’s circumstances weren’t changing. In fact, we have no indication as to whether his earthly circumstances *ever* got any better. And it left him asking:

why have you rejected me? (Psalm 43:2b ESV)

Have you ever felt that? Rejected by God? There’s no shame in it. Sometimes life is hard and sometimes we can’t help but feel this way. I know that I have. In fact, even the great missionary Adoniram Judson faced these seasons of depression. He once wrote in his journal:

God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not.⁵

Sometimes that’s how we truly feel. Like the Psalmist, we feel far from God. We feel forgotten by God. We feel rejected by God. Maybe you’re feeling some of that this morning. The question is: What do we do with those feelings? In the chorus of this song, the Psalmist points us toward the answer. After voicing his despair, three times he sings out this culminating chorus:

Chorus. My feelings are wrong

In each of the stanzas, the Psalmist had questions for God. “Where is God? Why have You forgotten me? Why have you rejected me?” But in this repeating chorus, the Psalmist who has been questioning God turns instead to question his own feelings. He asks:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?

⁵ Adoniram Judson as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acadamie Books, 1983), 129.

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

Here, the Psalmist teaches us the art of *questioning* and *coaching* our feelings. Martyn Lloyd-Jones – reflecting on this passage – asks the probing question:

Have you not realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?⁶

Isn't that the truth? So many of us resonated with the various stanzas of this song. "I DO feel far from God! I DO feel forgotten! I DO feel rejected!" But how many of us have learned to sing the chorus? How many of us have learned the art of *questioning and coaching our feelings*?

That's what our culture is missing right now. We are being led into captivity by our feelings. We can't look away from them. We have an introspection obsession. But God has shown us a better way. So, very quickly as we conclude, I want to take the lessons we've learned from this text, and I want to draw out some simple principles for our complicated feelings.

Simple Principles for Complicated Feelings

First, we are reminded in this song that:

1. Feelings are part of the human experience

William Plumer says here:

If seasons of terrible depression come, no strange thing has happened to us. The same came to the author of this Psalm.⁷

One of the reasons why God gave us these 150 Psalms is because we need to be reminded that life is filled with a wide array of beautiful and painful feelings! There are Psalms for the depressed and Psalms for the joy-filled, Psalms for the betrayed and Psalms for friendship, Psalms for doubt and

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 20.

⁷ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 503.

Psalms for belief. The whole spectrum is on display in this Book because complicated feelings are a part of what it means to be human! John Calvin wrote:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, ‘an anatomy 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.⁸

Sometimes we wonder if a real Christian could ever feel the things we’re feeling. The Psalms dispel that insecurity. You should expect to feel some complicated things. Feelings aren’t indicators that you’re disqualified as a Christian. They are indicators that you are HUMAN!

That’s the first principle. The second flows out of the first:

2. Feelings should not be hidden or suppressed

I suspect that this was the principle that my grandfather’s generation needed to be reminded of. There was a way of thinking that seemed to view the expression of feelings as an expression of weakness. Big, complicated feelings didn’t need to be discussed and they most certainly didn’t have any place in the worship gathering! A stiff upper lip, as they say!

But that is entirely opposite to what we see in the Psalms. Remember, the Book of Psalms was the Holy Spirit inspired hymnal of the church! These are worship songs, given *by God to us for* our corporate worship. That means that God intended for us to voice these complicated feelings together in our worship gatherings!

Therefore, if our worship gatherings only hit the note of joy but never give voice to these expressions of grief, betrayal, depression and confusion, then our worship gatherings are not as biblical as we think they are. One commentator notes:

We can learn from the laments how to be honest with God. The psalmist held nothing back; neither should we.⁹

⁸ John Calvin as quoted by W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 8.

⁹ Tremper Longman III, *How To Read The Psalms*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 71.

So, feelings are part of the human experience and they should not be hidden or suppressed.

But, if my grandfather's generation needed to be reminded of those first two principles, my generation needs to be reminded of the next two. Third:

3. Feelings are not authoritative

Are we allowed to say that anymore? Let me say it again: Feelings are NOT authoritative.

You might feel attracted to someone that you shouldn't be attracted to, or you might feel confused about your gender, or you might feel unhappy about getting up to go to work, or you might feel bored in your marriage, or you might feel like God has forgotten about you. You might feel all of that on the same day! But just because you *feel* something doesn't mean that it's true. That's why the chorus of the song that we've been studying this morning redirects the attention *away* from the Psalmist's feelings and *toward* the truth. Do you see that?

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. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

Having expressed his feelings, the Psalmist is now putting them in their proper place. He's saying: "Yes, I feel all of that, but my feelings are wrong! My feelings are not telling me the truth because – in spite of all those feelings – God IS my salvation! THAT is the truth! THAT is the authority in my life! Regardless of how I feel!" And if the Psalmist could see that and declare that living as he did long before Jesus walked this earth, then HOW MUCH MORE ought we to see that truth displaying in BOLD on the cross? Regardless of how I feel HE IS MY SALVATION! I will hope in him.

Now, that truth didn't keep the Psalmist from expressing his feelings. He laid those all on the table before God. But then, having expressed those feelings, he rooted himself in the TRUTH.

THAT is the piece that we seem to be missing today. We have become *slaves* to our feelings. We have over corrected from the ditch that our grandparents were in and now we can't seem to STOP

talking about our feelings. We take our deepest, darkest feelings and we post them on the internet for strangers! We fixate on them. We find our *identity* in them. “I *feel*, therefore I am!”

But our feelings – real as they may be – are not authoritative.

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

And that leads to the fourth and final principle that we learn from this Psalm:

4. Feelings must be coached

That’s what the Psalmist is modelling for us in his song, and we need to model the same thing for one another in this community. As our culture goes further and further down this path of the idolization of feelings – as the next generation is further indoctrinated with the lie that how they feel is who they are – we need to model what it looks like to coach our feelings with the truth. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it so well:

The essence of this matter is to understand that this self of ours, this other man within us, has got to be handled. Do not listen to him; turn on him; speak to him; condemn him; upbraid him; exhort him; encourage him; remind him of what you know, instead of listening placidly to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you.¹⁰

Some of us feel depressed today. Some of us feel lost. Some of us feel faithless. Some of us feel confused. Some of us feel angry. And that will be true week after week as we gather in this place. If that’s you, I want you to know that I’m glad you’re here. We all are! You BELONG here. You don’t need to pretend that you’re feeling something else. You can lay those complicated feelings out on the table here because we’ve been called to:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15 ESV)

¹⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 21.

But we're not going to stop there. We're going to open God's word week after week, and we are going to force our subjective feelings to sit under and submit to the authoritative Word of God. We're going to *coach* our feelings. We're going to sing praise through tears. We're going to partake of the Lord's Supper even though we feel cold and distant. We're going to pray even though we feel doubt. Because our feelings are real and valid, but they do not define us.

How I feel does not define who I am. God defines who I am.

So if He says I'm forgiven, then I'm forgiven. Even if I feel dirty. If He says I'm a child of God, then I'm a child of God. Even if I feel forgotten. If he says I'm a temple of the living God, then that's what I am – even if He feels so far away. My heart is deceitful above all things, but He always and only tells the TRUTH. So, I will acknowledge my feelings and lay them down before Him but then I will look to Him to learn what is true. I will – by God's grace – learn to say with the Psalmist:

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. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

This is the truth. This is the authority. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.