

SPIRITUAL DEPRESSION IN THE PSALMS

THINKING AND FEELING WITH GOD

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Psalm 42

To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.

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

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. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” 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?”

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.

One of the prominent emotional conditions in the Psalms is spiritual depression. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a book titled *Spiritual Depression* and based it on Psalm 42. That’s the psalm we will focus on today—the one that says, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?”

The Psalms: Song and Instruction

The heading of the psalm reminds us of what we saw last week. “*To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.*”

The sons of Korah were a group of priests who were charged with the ministry of singing. [Second Chronicles 20:19](#) describes them in action: “The Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.”

So the heading implies that this psalm was probably used in public worship and was sung. That’s one part of what we said last week. The psalms are songs. They are poems. They are written to awaken and express and shape the emotional life of God’s people. Poetry and singing exist because God made us with emotions, not just thoughts. Our emotions are massively important.

The second thing to notice in the heading is that the psalm is called a “maskil.” It’s not clear what the word means. That’s why most versions don’t translate it. It comes from a Hebrew verb that means *to make someone wise*, or *to instruct*. So when applied to psalms, it may mean *a song that instructs*, or *a song that is wisely crafted*. That reminds us of the other thing we emphasized last week: The psalms intend to instruct.

“Blessed is the man whose delight is in the instruction of the Lord, and on his *instruction* he meditates day and night.”

So “To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah” underlines both points from last time: The psalms are instruction, and the psalms are songs. And Jesus taught that they were inspired by God. They intend to shape what the mind thinks, and they intend to shape what the heart feels. When we immerse ourselves in them, we are “thinking and feeling with God.” That’s what I am praying this series will help us to do.

An Overview of Psalm 42

The way I would like to take us into Psalm 42 is to give an overview, and then show six things that this godly man does in his spiritual depression—six things that I think are meant to shape how we deal with our own seasons of darkness.

Here’s the overview. Externally his circumstances are oppressing. Verse 3 says that his enemies “say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’” And verse 10 says the same thing, only it describes the effect as a deadly wound: “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?’” And the taunt “Where is your God?” implies that something else has gone wrong too, or they wouldn’t be saying, “Where is your God?” It looks to them like he has been abandoned.

The internal emotional condition of the psalmist is depressed and full of turmoil. In verses 5 and 11, he describes himself as “cast down” and “in turmoil.” In verse 3 he says, “My tears have been my food day and night.” So he is discouraged to the point of crying day and night. In verse 7 he says that it feels like drowning: “All your breakers and your waves have gone over me.”

Fighting to Hope in God

In all of this, he is fighting for hope. Verse 5: “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.” Verse 11: “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.” He is not surrendering to the emotions of discouragement. He is fighting back.

I cannot tell you how many hundreds of times in the last twenty-eight years at Bethlehem I have fought back the heaviness of discouragement with these very words: “Hope in God, John. Hope in God. You will again praise him. This miserable emotion will pass. This season will pass. Don’t be downcast. Look to Jesus. The light will dawn.” It was so central to our way of thinking and talking in the early eighties that we put a huge “Hope in God” sign on the outside wall of the old sanctuary and became known around the neighborhood as the “Hope in God” church.

His external circumstances are oppressing. His internal emotional condition is depressed and full of turmoil. But he is fighting for hope. And the really remarkable thing is that at the end of the psalm, he is still fighting but not yet where he wants to be. The last words of the psalm—and the last words of the next psalm—are “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.” He leaves us still fighting for the joyful experience of hope and freedom from turmoil. He is not yet praising the way he wants to.

A Bittersweet Ending

Is it a happy ending? Like almost everything else in this life, it’s mixed. His faith really is amazing, and his fight is valiant. But he is not where he wants to be in hope and peace and praise.

So I assume this psalm is in the Bible by God's design and that if we listen carefully, if we watch this psalmist struggle, if we meditate on this instruction day and night, our thoughts about God and life, on the one hand, and our emotions, on the other hand, will be shaped by God. And we will become like a tree that bears fruit and whose leaves don't wither when the drought of oppression and discouragement and turmoil comes.

How the Psalmist Responds to Discouragement

So here are six ways that this psalmist responds to the discouragement and turmoil that has come with the taunts of his enemies. I'll put them in an order that they might have happened, though they surely overlap and repeat themselves.

1. He asks God Why?

First, he responds to his circumstances at one point by asking God Why? Verse 9: "I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'" The word *forgotten* is an overstatement. And he knows it is. He just said in verse 8, "By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me."

What he means is that, it *looks* like God has forgotten him. It feels as if God has forgotten him. If God hasn't forgotten him, why aren't these enemies driven back and consumed? It would be good if all of us were so composed and careful in the expression of our discouragements that we never said anything amiss. But that is not the way we are. In the midst of the tumult of emotions, we are not careful with our words.

Those of us who were around in 1985 when I preached through Job may remember how this truth came home to us as a church. For years afterward, we would refer to the words of [Job 6:26](#) and talk about "words for the wind." Job says to his critical friends, "Do you think that you can reprove words, when the speech of a despairing man is wind?" In other words, don't jump on the words of a despairing man. Let it go. There will be ample time to discern the deeper convictions of the heart. Let the wind blow them away. They are words for the wind.

So the psalmist asks *Why?* It's a legitimate question. He may not have asked the question with theological or linguistic precision, but if he proves in time that he did not mean that God had forgotten him, we will let that be words for the wind.

2. He affirms God's sovereign love.

Second, in the midst of his discouragement he affirms God's sovereign love for him. 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." In verses 5 and 11, he calls God "my salvation and my God." And even though he says it looks as if God has forgotten him, he never stops believing in the absolute sovereignty of God over all his adversity. So at the end of verse 7, he says, "All your breakers and your waves have gone over me." *Your* breakers and *your* waves have gone over me.

In other words, all his crashing and tumultuous and oppressing and discouraging circumstances are the waves of God. He never loses this grip on the great truths about God. They are the ballast in his little boat of faith. They keep him from capsizing in the tumult of his emotions. O how many of you have learned this more deeply than I because of the waves that have broken over your lives. You have learned deeply that it is no relief to say that God does not rule the wind and the waves.

So the psalmist affirms God's sovereign love for him in and through all the troubles.

3. He sings!

Third, he sings to the Lord at night, pleading for his life. 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.*” This is not a song of jubilant hope. He doesn’t feel jubilant hope. He is seeking jubilant hope. This is a prayer song and pleading song—a song “to the God of my life.” That is, a song pleading for his life.

But isn’t it amazing that he is singing his prayer! My guess is that this is where Psalm 42 came from. This very psalm may be that night-time prayer-song. Not many of us can compose songs when we are discouraged and weeping day and night. That’s why a singable psalter is good to keep around—or a hymnbook with the whole array of emotions. For example, Isaac Watts wrote these verses to be sung:

How long wilt Thou conceal Thy face?
My God, how long delay?
When shall I feel those heav’nly rays
That chase my fears away?

How long shall my poor laboring soul
Wrestle and toil in vain?
Thy word can all my foes control
And ease my raging pain.

The Psalter of 1912 contains these verses to be sung the way the psalmist of Psalm 42 sang at night:

How long wilt Thou forget me,
O Lord, Thou God of grace?
How long shall fears beset me
While darkness hides Thy face?
How long shall griefs distress me
And turn my day to night?
How long shall foes oppress me
And triumph in their might?

O Lord my God, behold me
And hear mine earnest cries;
Lest sleep of death enfold me,
Enlighten Thou mine eyes;
Lest now my foe insulting
Should boast of his success,
And enemies exulting
Rejoice in my distress.

These are not jubilant songs. But they are songs of faith. And they are shaped by thinking and feeling with God in the Psalms.

4. He preaches to his own soul.

Fourth, the psalmist preaches to his own soul. Verse 5: “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.” O how crucial this is in the fight of faith. We must learn to preach the truth to ourselves. Listen to Lloyd-Jones take hold of this verse:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are

talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: "Self, listen for moment, I will speak to you." (*Spiritual Depression*, 20-21)

On this side of the cross, we know the greatest ground for our hope: Jesus Christ crucified for our sins and triumphant over death. So the main thing we must learn is to preach the gospel to ourselves:

Listen, self: If God is for you, who can be against you? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for you, how will he not also with him graciously give you all things? Who shall bring any charge against you as God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for you. Who shall separate you from the love of Christ? ([Romans 8:31–35](#) paraphrased)

Learn to preach the gospel to yourself. If this psalmist were living after Christ, that is what he would have done.

5. He remembers past experiences.

Fifth, the psalmist remembers. He calls past experiences to mind. He remembers past corporate worship experiences. Verse 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."

O how much could be said here about the importance of corporate worship in our lives. Don't take these times together lightly. What we do here is a real transaction with the living God. God means for these encounters with him in corporate worship to preserve your faith now and in the way you remember them later. If corporate worship were not a real supernatural work of God, it would be pure sentimentalism for the psalmist to remember his experiences. He is not engaging in nostalgia. He is confirming his faith in the midst of turmoil and discouragement by remembering how real God was in corporate worship.

O how much more serious we should be about corporate worship. Ask the Lord to show you what is at stake here.

6. He thirsts for God.

Finally, the psalmist thirsts for God like a deer pants for the stream. Verses 1–2: "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" What makes this so beautiful, and so crucial for us, is that he is not thirsting mainly for relief from his threatening circumstances. He is not thirsting mainly for escape from his enemies or for their destruction.

It's not wrong to want relief and to pray for it. It is sometimes right to pray for the defeat of enemies. But more important than any of that is God himself. When we think and feel with God in the Psalms, this is the main result: We come to love God, and we want to see God and be with God and be satisfied in admiring and exulting in God.

That is my ultimate hope and prayer for these weeks that we spend together in the Psalms. That God would be revealed, and we would want to know him as he is in himself and fellowship with him.

Seeing the Face of God in the Gospel of Christ

A likely translation of the end of verse 2 is: “When will I come and see the face of God.” The final answer to that question was given in [John 14:9](#) and [2 Corinthians 4:4](#). Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” ([John 14:9](#)). And Paul said that when we are converted to Christ we see “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)).

When we see the face of Christ, we see the face of God. And we see the glory of his face when we hear the story of the gospel of his death and resurrection. It is “the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.”

May the Lord increase your hunger and your thirst to see the face of God. And may he grant your desire through the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.