

LIFTING DEPRESSION

Psalms 42; 43

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Although in our Bibles these are listed as two separate psalms, actually 42 and 43 constitute one psalm. They are linked together with a repeated verse, which occurs twice in Psalm 42 and once in Psalm 43. “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:11; 43:5). This psalm is a psalm for the person who is depressed. It shows, by giving us an introspective view of a person who is depressed, how the one who is faithful in his relationship to the Lord has a cure for depression.

Notice the superscription is to the choirmaster. We should probably think of these psalms as teaching psalms, they are meant to give some insight into the ways in which God works in our lives. Also, notice that it is a psalm to the Sons of Korah, who were noted as singing this particular psalm. They are identified with a number of other psalms as well.

One of the tremendous things we should note about this psalm, in the outset, as we have tried to note in the other psalms, is the level of honesty that is going on. Sometimes, the Christian life is painted as if to say that there are no dark hues, no moments of difficulty. That it is almost blasphemous or sinful for Christians to indicate that they have problems or struggles. Yet the psalms indicate none of this point of view. Rather, faith comes as a result of being honest with life situations and recognizing that God is with us and indeed in us in our very down moments. The psalmist comes with a dead honesty of how he’s feeling.

This psalm gives us a terrific perspective of what causes depression—the sources of depression. Often by simply recognizing where something comes from, we’re a long way toward curing it.

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The psalmist recognizes the two things that have caused his depression.

I. One thing that is a great cause of depression is loneliness or separation.

Another cause is a feeling of defeat. That what we had set out to do has not been accomplished.

This psalmist has been cut off and separated in a number of ways. Depression can obviously come on in life if we're just separated in one way. But this psalmist has had a number of ways that he feels separated and lonely.

He starts off his psalm by indicating he has a lonely feeling in respect to his relationship to God.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1–2, NIV). He's feeling, as we do in depression, that God has forgotten us. If we could only have the relationship with the Lord that we once had!

Not only is he feeling separation from God, but he feels separation from other people. Verse 4,

“These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng” (NIV). We can tell that now this man who writes the psalm is in a place of isolation. Here, in verse 4, he's talking about the times of gathering he used to have with the community of God at the temple in Jerusalem. But now he's separated from those persons. He has to bear his depression in his life alone.

Nothing is more gripping and more fracturing to us than to be cut off from those we love. His problem is compounded in that he's not only separated from God and others—it seems like life, when it comes cascading in, all falls in—he's separated also from the great moments he's had in life. He has been at great meetings at the festival. We know this syndrome in our society, that at Christmas time, the suicide rate goes up. Why? Because people are separated from the great

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moments of life. On Labor Day it doesn't happen. At Christmas time, people are remembering. When you're alone it's quite another thing.

The psalmist is also separated from his home. He's saying, "I remember my home. I'm away from it now."

Separation. This psalm—which comes from a man who has been separated from God, his friends, great moments, his home—becomes a resource and a blessing if you've gone through a similar experience. The loneliness strikes when you're ill and you're not coming off the sick bed for a while. When you're shut in and alone, this psalm has terrific meaning. We can identify with it.

II. Not only is this man lonely, but he has suffered apparent defeat.

Throughout the psalm, he makes mention of his enemies. His enemies are saying, like in verse 3 and 10, "Where is your God? You wouldn't be in this situation if your God hadn't left you. You have failed. What you've set out to do has not been accomplished." Finally, it gets to the psalmist himself so that he says, in verse 9, to God, "Why have you forgotten me?" (NIV). He's beginning to believe all that everybody else is telling him.

Psalms 42 and 43 find the psalmist in the presence of his adversaries, but not in the presence of his friends. We do not see friends being mentioned. We only find enemies. So his problem is loneliness and apparent defeat.

In that state of mind, we come to understand the stages that are reflected in this psalm. The first stage, the first five verses—and by the way, all of these stages close with this continued refrain "Why art thou cast down O my soul?"—the first stage reflects total dejection. He starts out the psalm by indicating that he is spiritually dry. He sees the parched season. The heart is panting for something to drink and there is nothing to assuage its thirst. He says, "That's the way I am, O

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God. I thirst for You like that and, as I look at the resources I have, it appears that there is nothing to take care of the thirst which I have.” “I thirst for Thee, O living God, as a deer thirsts for a running stream.”

The person who can say this is the person who all along has wanted to meet with the Lord. Not the person who has had a casual interest. Not the person who can take or leave the gathering of the people of the Lord in worship. But here is a person whose roots had always been deep in the meeting with the faithful and with the singing of songs to God. Whose heart now is spiritually dry. Perhaps he feels his spiritual development has been arrested. Or what spiritual growth he had is now dead.

He’s not only spiritually dry, but he’s ravaged by sorrow. In Psalm 42: 3, he indicates, “My tears have been my food” (NIV). He’s done more weeping than eating. If you’ve never had that experience, you can’t really appreciate what the psalmist is going through. But it is something, when you’ve walked through a deep valley, to know what it is to see what this psalmist is saying. “I’ve been crying, Lord. My eyes are filled with tears. I’d rather cry than eat.” That is contributing to his dejection.

Then to compound matters, he is looking upon the past. He’s saying, “These things I remember. I remember how I went with the throng. I remember how I led them in the procession.” Evidently, he was a spiritual leader among the people. I remember the shouts of thanksgiving, the multitude in the festival. “Why are you downcast, O my soul?” (verse 5, NIV).

Looking back at the good old days. Saying, “There’s nothing like the good old days.” When you’re in a moment when the days aren’t so good, right now, it does make the good old days look awfully good. This man is looking back, saying, “I remember the good old days.”

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When we start looking back at moments we really treasure, in our memory, they are always better than they were. That's the trick memory plays.

The psalm is going through this. This psalmist is talking to himself. He hasn't yet talked to God. He hasn't gotten that far along to a solution. He's talking to himself. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:5-6, NIV).

In remembering, all of a sudden something had jogged him. That is, God had come through before. "I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." Meaning, "God has come through before." Maybe the way to come out of the depression is to begin to reflect upon God's goodness and how He has worked in my past life. That's a start. His memory had jarred him into a glimmer of hope.

There have been times in my own life in which I've gone through severe financial depression, most acute in these times of inflation. Whenever that happens, there is an experience in my life I can go back to, and hope and praise God. Every time I've gotten into a jam! It's a great thing to be able to look at the experiences in your life where God has come through. That's what the psalmist does.

But the mind is a funny thing. Once you think you've gotten out of the jam, all of a sudden, you find yourself recycling thoughts you just had that are on the downside. That's what the psalmist does. He's come through "My help is in God." He's gotten his head together.

But then, all of a sudden, "My soul is downcast within me" (verse 6, NIV). His dejection is now becoming bewilderment. He's come through this high plain, but now he's confused. The reason why he's becoming confused is his head tells him God is with him, but his emotions are saying, "God's left you." So often there is that conflict between what we know intellectually and what is

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happening to us on the emotional level. Intellectually, he's saying, "God's steadfastness is always running, always available, the supply is always there—deep calls unto deep." Even within nature—there are voices that call across great distances. There is a deep in God calling unto the deeps in man. There is sureness in God, which is love by day and song by night. The deep is calling unto us and we feel its pull. We rise to meet it. The psalmist is saying, "That's how I feel and I know intellectually God calls unto me." Deep calls unto deep.

But he turns right around in his feelings and says, "I say to God my Rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?' My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:9-10, NIV). Often when we are the most down, the words we hear are of persons who can only drive us further down.

That's why we're in continual need of the gospel. The Lord doesn't need persons that have a ministry of discouragement. He brings persons who have a ministry of encouragement.

This psalm reflects this feeling, that God is not with him, and the continual asking of the question, "Why? Why?" The psalmist says over and over again about his depression, "Why?" Ten times in the psalm the word "why" is used.

Maybe sometimes instead of saying "Why" we can say "Why not" to things. Why should we be exempt? Why not?

There are ways to respond to the Why's in our life. A multiple choice kind of way. The psalmist was considering, "Why is this happening to me? Maybe God is not there." But he discounts that. God is there.

Maybe God doesn't care. But he discounts that because God cares.

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Then he turns within. “Maybe I’ve failed God.” Maybe he has. But there is a point where introspection turns unfruitful. We need to stand upon the righteousness of Christ and no longer try to find out if we’ve confessed our guilt and our sin, if there’s anything left, and not be cast down to continually examine and pick ourselves apart. But instead, to rest in the providence of God.

The psalmist is ready to do that now. “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:11, NIV). He’s coming through to that verse lodging in his mind, as a way of coming out of the depression. My hope is in God. Even though I don’t feel like it. Even though I don’t feel as if he were here. He is. My hope is there.

What a difference in depression between the person who has the Lord and the person who doesn’t. Same as the person who’s sick and doesn’t have the Lord and the person who does. Or in mourning or death. The person with the Lord has everything going for him.

The psalmist isn’t saying, “What was the good of it all?” No matter how deep the depression is, I have something going for me that no one without God has going for them. The presence of God, the reality of His existence, the sureness of the fact that things are going to turn out in His will for my good.

III. Thus, he is able to sing the third refrain of the psalm, the part we know as Psalm 43. In these verses, he turns his case over to God.

Then he turns his face towards the future. Verses 1–2 find him turning his case over to God.

“Vindicate me, O God.” It’s the first time he’s petitioned God. Before now, he’s just been complaining. “Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. You are God my stronghold” (Psalm 43:1–2, NIV). He is now

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willing to say, “Whatever You intend to do in this situation, Lord, I am ready to wait and accept. Vindicate me. You’ll come through.”

I don’t know how to tell you the technique of turning things over to God when you’re going through a real hassle. With words you can say it. But the only way you can put it into practice is to do it in your life. There are times when you’re wrestling with something and you go on for days and weeks not able to turn it over to God. Then it’s as if the Holy Spirit, in a moment of yielding on our part, turns a light bulb on in our head saying, “What can you do about this anyway? Give it to me. I’ll take care of it. I’ve got resources to handle it. Rest. Sleep. Be calm. Be certain.” That’s what the psalmist is saying—turn it over to God.

IV. Once he’s turned it over to God, he can set his face toward the future.

Up until now, he’s been simply looking at the past, which is a sure way to stay in depression. But now he’s looking ahead.

There are some persons who in depression turn to the future and say, “The worst is yet to come.” But the psalmist turns to the future with hope, knowing the God who fills all of time is in the future as he’s been in the past. He says, “I will come to God. I will again take up my place in Jerusalem. I will again worship the Lord.”

All of the Old and New Testament bear witness to this great truth, that God is working out His purposes and that everything will work together for good. Hebrews says, “Christ, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.” He went through the depression of the cross. But when he was going through it, He knew the outcome. Romans 5:3–4 says, “Suffering produces endurance. And endurance, character. And character, hope.” Peter says, “We have exceeding and great and precious promises. According to his promise, we wait for a new heaven and new earth” (2 Peter 3:13). John, who writes in a time of great Christian persecution in 1 John 2:25, speaks of

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that dark time of depression upon the church. “This is what he has promised us—eternal life.”

Paul states to the Corinthians, “If in this life we have only hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:9). The assumption being there is a hope beyond the present.

The reality of Christ is fixed.

The psalmist turns his face to the future and he’s able to sing and to praise. Therefore, the verse which stood him in good stead during his trial is said once more—this time, without the dejection or the bewilderment or the past. But now with the certainty, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? [The answer:] Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 43:5, NIV).

Closing Prayer

We’re thankful today, our Lord, for the psalmist’s phrase, “Hope in God.” “For I shall again praise him, my Savior and my God.” We are thankful that the psalmist has taught us through this psalm that the hope in God is more than a faint wish, but it is a reality. You do come through, Lord. You know and Your Spirit searches diligently the hearts of every one of us in this congregation today. You particularly know today whom You’ve sent Your Word to heal. You know also who You’ve sent Your Word to instruct, so that there may be a guarding against a day of depression. We know we are not exempt from the sorrows or temptations or the troubles of life. We are exempt from the feeling of nothingness. We are exempt from assuming that everything is going to go wrong. We are exempt from any idea that, in the long run, You would fail us. You are the same yesterday, today, and forever. For the person who feels really cast down, let Your Word be a ministering presence in this moment. Lift us in faith to acknowledge and to see You. Even when our feelings and emotions appear to be leading us another way, fix deeply within us, “deep calling unto deep”—Your life and Your love calling to the depths of us.

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Causing us to rise and follow You. We give You thanks for these moments we have together around Your Word and to share in common our faith. Bless Your people today with the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, we ask. Amen.