

Sermon: Psalm 42 and 43

Join with me in reading from the Psalms. All of the psalms are divided itself into five books and today we are reading the first two psalms of the second book: Psalms 42 and 43. Book two, which runs through Psalm 72 and several chapters into book three has been called the “Elohistic Psalter,” because “Elohim” is the primary word used for God in this section of the Psalms. There are three stanzas in our current 42.1-5; 42.6-11; and 43.1-5.

For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.

- 42** As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants 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 day long, “Where is your God?”
- 4 These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to
the house of God,
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.
- 5 Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him
For the help of His presence.
- 6 O my God, my soul is in despair within me;
Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan
And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls;
All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.

- 8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime;
And His song will be with me in the night,
A prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"
- 10 As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
- 11 Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.
- 43** Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation;
O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!
- 2 For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?
- 3 O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me;
Let them bring me to Your holy hill
And to Your dwelling places.
- 4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
To God my exceeding joy;
And upon the lyre I shall praise You, O God, my God.
- 5 Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why are you disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.

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The Soul in Despair

Studies have shown that those who believe in God, attend church, and read the Bible are less likely to be depressed. That's of minimal comfort, however, when you are a child of God and living with deep, abiding despair. That's where the psalmist is in this morning's text.

Would you be surprised to learn that of the various types of psalms, psalms of lament outnumber all the others? Even psalms of praise. Why?

In our psalms this morning, it seems the author wrestles between what he knows to be true about God and how things feel under the very oppressive circumstances. Notice how he phrases it:

"Why are you so downcast, O my soul, put your hope in God!" (42.5, 11; 43.5)

The writer asks himself this question because he knows that even amid the circumstances he is facing that he has reason not to be downcast. In other words, the relationship that God has established with him has benefited him so thoroughly that despite the circumstances he should be writing a psalm of praise.

Well, what are the conditions causing this upheaval? He **recalls the reasons for his despair.**

I. THE AUTHOR RECALLS THE REASONS FOR HIS DESPAIR

1) He is experiencing an unwelcomed separation from God

vv 1, 2—The picture is of a deer which has a singular focus: finding a life-saving stream to quench its thirst...considering the context of the psalm—we can imagine the deer fleeing from a predator. In an arid climate quickly depleted of adequate hydration.

Just as the deer is panting for water, the psalm writer longs for God. He is experiencing a dryness in his relationship with God.

He is expressing how he feels. And the fact of the matter is, he is distant from the worship he had grown to love. Notice, he is far away from home. That is what is meant by the second part of v.6. Mt. Hermon is at the northern-most boundary of Israel. He is at the headwaters of the Jordan River.

RECENTLY we were on a retreat in western Virginia. Imagine walking there. My calculation is that it would have taken 3 full days of fast walking to get there by foot. This man is approximately twice that distance from Jerusalem.

Some have suggested he is a captive of the armies of Babylon. And he is taking his final glance back toward his beloved home where he worshiped God with joyful multitudes—leading them in the celebration of their festivals (v 4).

2) v 4—His memory of better days

Memories of pleasant days in the past can be helpful. They can remind us of God's goodness and those that have experienced it with us. But this situation is more like what I heard a young man wistfully saying:

You may have noticed it the prescript (heading) that this Psalm was composed by the Sons of Korah. Most likely it was written by one and attributed to the clan. Notice too that this psalm is meant to be sung. It is addressed to the choir director. It is a “maskil”

Sons of Korah (Numbers 26:10 in Moses day)—I Chronicles 6:16 and 2 Chronicles 20:19

3) A third cause of his depression is taunting from unjust adversaries

vv 3, 10, 43:1, 2—Those who would verbally abuse him say, “Where is your God?”

This is not an easy question to answer, is it? I ask you, Christian, where is your God? Well, you might say, He is in heaven. Or you might say He is present everywhere or He is with me or some answer like that.

And those are fine answers. But that doesn’t really help in a situation like this, does it? And that’s because the accuser is not just asking, “Where is your God located.” This is not some late-night dorm room debate about God’s imminence.

The question really means, “If your God is as real and powerful, and compassionate as you say he is, why are you so miserable, weak, and abandoned?” In other words, “Why has your God not shown up in your time of need?” That’s the crux of the jesting. “You’re obviously not living the victorious Christian life” we might hear in our day.

Yes, it is true, the taunter could probably point to an idol and say, “There is my god.” And at the moment, his mute, deaf, dumb idol may seem more adequate than the true God of Israel. But notice

throughout, the psalmist never really doubts God's willingness and ability to save.

The Psalmist, of course, is not the first to be in circumstances in which the taunting "where question" could have been asked. For example, one could ask:

- Adam, where was your God when you were being tempted in the garden?
- Joseph, where was your God when your brothers sold you to the Midianites?
- Job, where was your God when your family was killed and your body infected with open sores?
- Moses, where was your God when God's people rebelled against your leadership or when they refused to enter the land of promise?
- David, where was God when you were tempted by Bathsheba or when your son Absalom rebelled against you?
- Jeremiah, where was God when your own people threw you into an empty well to die and when the Babylonian soldiers ravaged Jerusalem and the children of Israel?
- Daniel, where was your God when your comrades were thrown into the furnace to be killed?
- Joseph, where was your God when Herod slaughtered young children in Bethlehem and you, your wife and your son had to flee to Egypt?
- Paul, where was your God when you were assaulted, stoned, and left for dead, or when you sat in jail for years, or sailed as a prisoner on raging seas and with no hope of landing safely on shore? Where was your God?
- Peter, where was your God when they crucified you?
- John, where was your God when they exiled you to the island of Patmos?

- Where was your God when the saints of Hebrews 11 were tortured, mocked and flogged, chained and imprisoned? Where was God when they were stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword? Where was God when they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, and tormented— destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground?
- Mary, where was your God when they crucified your Son on the cross?

WE CAN PLAY THIS “WHERE IS YOUR GOD GAME” ALL DAY LONG. WE COULD ASK THE IDOL WORSHIPPER, “WHERE WAS YOUR GOD WHEN...?”

If nothing else, I hope you will see that despairing circumstances are not a sign of defeat. They also are not a sign of God’s abandonment. And they do not determine theological truth.

And this son of Korah seems to understand that too. Notice what he says in verse 7

4) Overwhelming trials

v 7—“ *Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.*”

There is a sense here that the panting of the deer for refreshing water has been replaced by a gasping for breath. There’s too much water! It may be the author is inspired by the waterfalls that collect into the Jordan River flowing south toward his beloved home in Jerusalem. But notice in his analogy he is standing in the midst of these breakers these waterfalls.

Mt. Mizar (small)—a small hill near Mt. Hermon or perhaps Mt.

Hermon is a “small hill” in comparison to the joy and glory found at Mt. Zion.

“Deep calls to deep.” It is as if one massive body of water stirs another, which in turn calls to a third to all flood over this man’s head.

If you’ve been to the beach you know the power of an ocean’s wave. Even a small wave buffets your body. Here, the author is overwhelmed with his circumstances.

We know this because he has told us that his sustenance has been only his tears (v 3). Just imagine standing amid large ocean waves beating against the shore. This is what the author is experiencing.

YEARS AGO I was canoeing with friends on the Rappahannock River. While on a stretch where the water was fairly deep and thunderstorm blew up quickly and my partner and I were overturned and the capsized canoe was on top of us.

We were able to stand on the rocky bottom and escape danger.

NOTICE THAT GOD IS HIS ROCK (42.9) EVEN AMID HIS FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT

Did you notice his attribution of these waves and breakers? He clearly associates them with God...YOUR WATERFALLS, YOUR BREAKERS, YOUR WAVES roll over me. Is it possible that the sovereign God of all creation would bring such events into the life of one of His children? In short, the answer is yes.

- Consider what Jeremiah writes in Lamentations: “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?” (3.39). Consider Job 1.6-12.
- Consider what Joseph says to his evil, conniving brothers (Gen 50.19, 20)

A fifth item is causing him despair:**5) God seems to delay in His response to his needs and he feels rejected by God**

42:9, 43:2—We can't help but remember the poor widow of Luke 18

Other causes for despair

Death, failures, sin, and yes, even success (Elijah for example I Ki 19.4)

Reminder: Romans 8

- What do we think God means when He says, "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes"? (8.28)
- There is no loss in the list 8.29-30 (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified).
- More than conquerors. Why more? Because there is no defeat after the victory. The conquest is permanent. There is no one or anything that can take us away from God's love or undo our adoption as sons (8.31-39).

Well, it is one thing to identify the causes of despair, it is a wholly other thing to know how to address them. The sons of Korah give us some help.

II. The author reveals the remedies for his despair

And notice there is a progression as we move from Psalm 42 into Psalm 43. The author addresses his own soul:

1) He speaks to his soul

vv 42.5, 11; 43.5—these refrains serve to mark 3 stanza, each stanza ending with these words.

Undoubtedly, you've noticed the multiple sort of communications going on in these chapters. There's the enemy taunting this son of Korah regarding his God. There's the author talking to God, asking questions like, "Why have you forgotten me?" (v 9), and then there's the author talking to himself, or his soul.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of the most influential ministers of the 20th century. He preached multiple sermons each week to thousands for 40 years, 30 of which were at Westminster Chapel in London. Lloyd-Jones wrote a book on the topic of the Psalm entitled, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cures*. He makes an interesting point about this self-talk we see being played out in these refrains.

He says this is in a nutshell the "essence of the treatment" for spiritual depression. Lloyd-Jones makes the point that we too often allow ourselves to talk to us rather than us talking to ourselves. In other words, when we arise in the morning, all the troubles of the day come flooding in—in essence the source of those thoughts is

ourselves—our soul, if you will. But our conversation needs to go the other way. We need to set the record straight with our soul. We need to question it, “Why are you downcast” and then remind it to trust in God. (*Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cures*, 20, 21).

A second point is related to the first:

2) Another remedy the psalm employs is to remember God (v 6)

This is most critical too. When we speak to our souls as the psalmist does, we recall who God is, what he has done in the past. As Christians we recall His attributes, His mercy, grace, love, forgiveness of sin through Christ Jesus.

Now with the psalmist, we’ve seen that he has remembered once already in v 4. There his memory while of things that are very good seems to result more in sorrow because he is not currently experiencing the joy of leading others in worship in the house of God. This kind of remembering, while good, can only go so far.

But in verse 6, this son of Korah writes that because his soul is in despair he will remember God. Notice the “*therefore*.” He will remember as a response to the despair.

The despair acts as a call to action. This kind of remembering is more than just working through assorted memories of the past. This is an intentional, active, obedient kind of remembering. It is very much focused on the present and the future.

Gerald Wilson comments, “To remember Yahweh is to ground one’s life in and on him and so to draw all one’s life decisions and actions out of that foundation” (*The NIV Application Commentary, Psalms Volume I*, 675).

Throughout the Old Testament God calls His people to remember.

There are at least 350 times throughout the OT that the term remember is used. And on the other side of the coin there are the reminders to not forget.

Let me give you just two examples:

1) “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” —that’s how it is phrased in Exodus 20. In Deuteronomy 5, Moses writes “Observe the Sabbath day” or as the King James puts it, “Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it...”

2) Deuteronomy 6—“Hear O Israel, the LORD your God He is one....” The passage calls Israel to not forget...and that not forgetting requires action, participation in the worship of God, the keeping of the Law.

Why? So when they enter the land and move into houses they did not build and eat plentifully from vineyards and fields they did not plant that they forget not the LORD.

3) He sings (v 8)

Did you know that the church in Philippi was established, in part, by Paul’s singing?

Paul in Philippi (Act 16:25) at midnight they were singing hymns of praise to God-----and Luke points out, “and the prisoner were listening.” Out of their despairing circumstances come hymns of praise and ultimately the salvation of the jailer and his family too.

4) He talks to God about his trouble (v 9)

Philippians 4.4-7—Rejoice, be gentle, (the Lord is near), *“be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*

5) He requests that God defend him and deliver him (43.1)

He is essentially saying, “act as my judge and my defender.”

6) He anticipates the very thing for which he has longed.

Notice the progression in Psalm 43:3-5

- God’s light and truth lead him
- He will come to the holy hill
- He will approach God’s dwelling places
- He will go to the altar
- He will go to God Himself, who is his exceeding joy

Well, the psalm ends with the refrain v 11—resolution is still elusive, but his faith is in God who is his rock.

Pilgrim’s Progress and the Giant ‘Despair’ and the key of ‘God’s Promises’

Why? Why do we face despair like that of the Sons of Korah communicate in these two psalms?

Other passages that will help give understanding:

- Romans 5:1-5
- James 1:2-4 and 1:12...

Let me just read one passage, Paul writing in II Corinthians 4:7-12:

“⁷ But we have this treasure [the glory of God in the face of Christ] in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death works in us, but life in you.”

Charles Spurgeon

- **‘Downgrade Controversy,’**
- **Difficulty with his health**
- **Teased and criticized by the media**

“The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlights of affliction.”