

Summer Psalms:
Why Are You Cast Down, O My Soul? (Psalms 42-43)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 29, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ I wonder if you noticed that Psalm 42 introduces Book Two of the Psalms. Maybe you didn't know that – that there are five books in the Psalter. Now it's debatable whether those five divisions are inspired by God like the content of the 150 individual psalms. But from early on, we know that Jewish rabbis broke up the Psalter into these five books – most likely as a reflection of the five books of the Torah (the Pentateuch). **They saw the Torah (the Law) as the LORD'S five-fold word to his people, and the Psalms is the people's five-fold response back to the LORD.**
 - That's why the Psalter has always been used as the songbook of God's people. That means they're not just to be read devotionally in your own quiet times. **The Psalms are meant to be sung corporately as responsive prayers to the LORD.** They give words and a voice to the people of God, and they factor in a whole slew of emotions.

- ❖ **In a worship service like this, there could be a hundred different emotions being felt right now.** And you yourself might feel differently this Sunday than you did last week, and you might show up next week in another emotional state.
 - **That's why there are different kinds of psalms that express a range of emotions.** You've got the typical hymns of praise and thanksgiving that focus on God's holy attributes or mighty works – that express our joy and confidence in him. **But then there are songs of lament – psalms that were birthed out of pain and anguish.**

- ❖ We're not as familiar with them (even though they're so prevalent in the Psalter). Probably because they're not as catchy. When you come to service and sing a song based on a psalm, you're expecting something like "*Give thanks to the LORD for he is good; his love endures forever.*" (Ps. 118:1) You're not expecting to sing Psalm 88:6-7, "*You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions of dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.*"
 - But that's how many worshippers feel on any given Sunday. That's how some of you feel right now. That's why we need songs of lament. **We need to give a voice to our grief. We need words to express our feelings of doubt and despair.** That's why I chose psalms 42-43 as our text today.

- ❖ Now the reason we're covering two psalms is because these two are most likely one. We don't know why or when it got split into two, but most commentators postulate that it was one psalm because of the repeating stanzas in chapter 42:5 and 11 and in chapter 43:5. Let me read it to you, "*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.*"
 - **As you can see, in this refrain, the psalmist is dealing with a range of emotions. And he feels them all so deeply.** I think it's going to resonate for many of you. He's going to give words to those feelings of yours. And for those of you who don't identify with what this psalmist is going through, you should listen and learn and equip yourself to better care for those in the same spiritual condition as our psalmist.

- ❖ I've broken this message down into three parts. First, we'll diagnose this spiritual condition and help you better detect it. Second, we'll identify the causes of this condition as found in our text. Third, we'll prescribe the cure.

The Condition

- ❖ So what's the spiritual condition that we're dealing with here in our psalm? What's plaguing the psalmist? It goes by different names. Some call it spiritual dryness or deadness. It's where your devotional life feels dry. Where your worship life feels lacking in fervor and joy.
 - Others would describe it as something more severe. **They'd call it spiritual desertion or abandonment.** It's where they've lost a feeling sense of the presence of God. He feels distant. He's gone silent. It's like God has deserted you and left you to deal with your own pain. To figure things out on your own.
- ❖ The psalmist uses a metaphor to describe this condition in v1. "*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.*" And then he explains the metaphor in v2, "*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?*"
 - **So the psalmist is comparing himself to a panting deer, and God, in this metaphor, is like a dry river bed.** He's looking to God for satisfaction. As the deers thirsts for living water, he's thirsting for the living God, but God is not there. **He has no feeling sense of God's presence in his life.** That's why he has to ask at the end of v2, "*When shall I come and appear before God?*" That's why in v9 he complains that God has forgotten about him, and in Psalm 43:2, he feels like God has rejected him.
- ❖ Note that the psalmist still believes in God. **He doesn't deny God's existence. He just can't feel God's presence.** Can you identify with that? Do you know what the psalmist is feeling? Maybe there was a time when your devotions were rich and life-giving. You had assurances of his love. You knew his joy, and when you worshipped, it filled your heart.
 - But now. **Now your times with the LORD are dry and inconsistent. Your prayers feel mechanical. Worship is joyless.** Doubt has crept in and laid claim to your heart. You still believe in God. You're not an atheist. But for all intents and purposes, you're living like one. Living like God doesn't really exist. Because he's not there. At least you don't sense him in your life anymore. **That's why you resonate with this thrice-repeated refrain. You know what it means to be downcast in your soul.**
- ❖ That's the condition being dealt with in our psalm. You can call it spiritual dryness, spiritual deadness, spiritual darkness, spiritual desertion, or spiritual depression. They're all fitting descriptions. For our sake, I'm going to stick with spiritual depression.
 - Mainly because I was re-reading a good **book by Martyn Lloyd-Jones called *Spiritual Depression***, and I'll refer to it later. But I need to make a qualification. Lloyd-Jones was a medical doctor before he became a preacher, so he knows a thing or two about clinical depression. And both spiritual and clinical depression are definitely related, but there is a distinction. You *can* experience one without the other.

- I want you to hear that so none of you assume that this psalm has little to do with you personally just because you don't show any signs of clinical depression. All of us are susceptible to the condition being described here.

❖ Now, based on this text, there are three things we can say about this condition. **First, if you've gone through this experience, you know that spiritual depression hurts you.** And by that, it would certainly include emotional pain, but spiritual depression has physical manifestations. **We're talking about physical pain, physical effects.** Just look in v10. The psalmist describes the pain he feels when others taunt him about the absence of God in his life. He says it's like "*a deadly wound in my bones.*" Other translations describe it as a shattering or crushing of bones. **There is a bone-crushing pain associated with spiritual depression.** It might originate from the mind, but it's felt in the body.

- If you look in v3, it says the psalmist has experienced a loss of appetite. He hasn't been eating right. "*My tears have been my food day and night.*" His constant weeping is taking over. He's forgetting to eat. He's losing his appetite. And he's probably losing productivity because his weeping is stretching from day to night.
 - **The point is to recognize that, when spiritual darkness descends and you can't sense the love or presence of God, the effects are more than just spiritual and emotional but very well physical. It hurts you.**

❖ **Second, spiritual depression haunts you.** What I mean is that it can come and go. The darkness can lift and hope feels renewed, but, as quickly as it goes, the darkness can descend over your soul again. Did you notice that in our psalm? The psalm seems to fade and rise and fade and rise from despair to hope, back to despair, and then hope again.

- **What this implies is that this condition is typically not a one-time experience where some sort of conversion moment or second blessing is the cure all.** This feeling of spiritual deadness can come and go and can happen to mature believers. Think of **Elijah** after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He was a mighty man of God, but in 1 Kings 19, he's curled up under a broom tree asking to die. Or think of **John the Baptist** who was not so confident about whether Jesus is the Christ, as doubt crept up while stuck in Herod's prison (Mt. 11:2-3).
 - Some of my heroes of the faith struggled with spiritual depression – Martin Luther, David Brainerd, William Cowper, Charles Spurgeon, etc. **The point is you mustn't assume that this condition only afflicts non-Christians or weak Christians. And don't assume there's a permanent fix.** Spiritual depression can afflict any believer, and it might be something that haunts you – that comes and goes over a lengthy season or over the entirety of your life.

❖ **Third, spiritual depression overwhelms you.** It incapacitates you. You feel like you're drowning in sorrow. But unlike in clinical depression, the underlying source of your sorrow is not a chemical imbalance, not your circumstances, not the words or actions of others. **In spiritual depression, that overwhelming, drowning sense of sorrow comes from God – or more accurately, it comes from God's removal of his comforting presence.**

- ❖ Look at how the psalmist describes his grief in v7, “*Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.*” Those sound like beautiful song lyrics. **But the psalmist is saying it feels like the waterfalls will crush him and the pounding waves will engulf him.** And whose waterfalls and whose breakers and waves is it? It’s God’s. It’s God’s waterfalls. It’s his breakers and waves overwhelming the psalmist.
 - **God, in his sovereign will, has removed, from the psalmist, the grace of his comforting presence.** And if you’re suffering this condition, it means he’s done the same to you. Only until you recognize it’s his waterfalls and his breakers and waves drowning you – **only then will you learn to recognize the lifeline he’s thrown you.**
 - The psalmist saw it. He speaks of it in v8. As he feels like he’s drowning in his grief, he recognizes God’s steadfast love. His *hesed*, his covenantal love, his unconditional commitment to his people. The psalmist grabs this lifeline and clings to it as his only hope. We’ll come back to this steadfast love.

The Causes

- ❖ So we’ve described this condition that’s plaguing the psalmist as spiritual depression. Now let’s consider some possible causes. **The causes, of course, are multifaceted since humans are complex creatures made up of body, mind, and spirit.** So I don’t imagine exhausting the list of causes in this one sermon. But I want to identify three that are found in our psalm.
- ❖ **First, spiritual depression can be caused by a separation from the corporate worship of God.** Notice how the psalmist is grieving the fact that he’s separated – not just from God – but from the temple of God in Jerusalem. Look at v4, “*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.*”
 - **What the psalmist thirsts for is to worship God – and not just in private devotion – but in the company of the worshipping community.** He longs to return to the temple. He makes it clear that’s what he’s thinking about when he speaks, in Psalm 43:3-4, of God’s holy hill and of his altar. He wants to be in the temple.
- ❖ The header says this is a song of **the sons of Korah**. They were in charge of temple music. Which makes sense since the psalmist says in v4 that he used to lead others in glad shouts and songs of praise. That explains why he’s so grieved to be cut off from the house of God.
 - If you look in v6, it says he’s writing, “*from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.*” That would place him in a region north of Galilee. Perhaps he’s been exiled there by a nation that attacked Jerusalem and carried off captives. **But regardless of the reasons why he’s separated from the temple, the point is that his absence from the corporate worship of God has contributed to his condition.**
- ❖ It’s obvious the psalmist is downcast and longing to be in God’s presence again. But my point is that he’s not longing to do a quiet time. He’s not panting for a personal devotion. **No, he’s longing and panting for corporate worship.** That’s where he’ll meet with God.

- ❖ Now let's be clear: God is not limited to the temple. He's omnipresent, and he meets with us on a personal and intimate level in our prayers and time in his Word. **But in both the Old and New Testament, God uniquely manifests himself to his people in corporate worship. In ways that he does *not* in our personal devotions.**
 - When the people of God assemble to sing together, to confess sins together, to pray together, to listen together to God's Word read and preached, to witness baptisms and share of the Lord's Supper together – God is *among us* and ministering *to us* in unique ways that you cannot replicate in private worship.

- ❖ I'm getting ahead of myself, but **what this means is that one of the remedies for a downcast soul is to make it a priority to regularly worship with the people of God.** If you're feeling dry and distant from God, this is the best place for you.
 - If you took a lump of coal that was burning on a pile and separated it from the other pieces, you know it'll cool off and lose all its heat. Add that's how many of you feel spiritually because, for whatever reason, you've been separated from the worshipping community for far too long. This is where you need to be. Once you throw that lump back in the burning pile, you can be sure it'll light and burn on its own again. That's what you can look forward to if you keep worshipping with the people of God.

- ❖ **Second, another cause of spiritual depression is the antagonization from worldly people.** The psalmist makes it clear that he's being taunted. In vv3 and 10, his adversaries are taunting him all day long, sarcastically asking him, "*Where is your God?*" Where is this all-mighty, all-loving God you claim to serve? If he loves you then why would he leave high and dry? Why won't he return to you?
 - **These taunts were getting to the psalmist and were exacerbating his sense of hopelessness.** Perhaps you feel the same. Maybe you have people in your life that are not helping in the way they speak flippantly or sarcastically about God. They tell you to get over it. Get over spiritual depression by getting over religion. Just move on.

- ❖ Granted, some of these people aren't trying to antagonize you. They're honestly trying to help your downcast soul. **But they're worldly people in that their advice is worldly. They're not going to point you to God and tell you to hope in him.** If you want to cure a downcast soul, they'll tell you to look at yourself in the mirror and believe in yourself.
 - This is why you need to be in community with the people of God. **This is why you need to join a church. Where you have fellow church members who are committed to speak truth into your life.** Not to question where is God. But to point you to him and to remind you to hope in him. That's what church members are for.

- ❖ **Third, another cause of spiritual depression are the accusations from spiritual enemies.** Worldly people might antagonize you, but spiritual enemies will accuse you. By that, I primarily have Satan in mind. That's what his name means, the Accuser. **When you're feeling distant or deserted by God, Satan is going to taunt you.** He'll tell you that you're not worthy to appear before God. He'll take your guilt and shame and beat you up with it.

- ❖ This would explain why the psalmist is asking God in Psalm 43:1 to vindicate him, to justify him, to defend his cause. But let's be clear: Not every case spiritual dryness or depression is triggered by some kind of sin we're struggling with. Like I said, the causes are multifaceted, and this condition can affect the maturest of Christians. **But when sin is involved, our despair escalates because the devil won't let up. He'll keep piling on the accusations.**

The Cure

- ❖ So what's the cure for this spiritual condition we're describing? We've examined the condition. We've considered three causes. Now what's the cure for spiritual depression. There are three things I see the psalmist doing: remembering, praying, and preaching.
- ❖ **First, notice how he's remembering.** In v4 he says, "*These things I remember as I pour out my soul.*" What things? He says he remembers those sweet times of corporate worship when God felt so real to him and so near to him. He brought to mind those memories. What about you? Maybe you need to recall a time in your life when worship was life-giving and you had that feeling sense of God's presence in your life. **The point is not to simply reminisce about the past, but to let those memories of God's nearness rejuvenate your faith.**
 - Look into v6. Look at the psalmist's reasoning. Because he's downcast, because he feels deserted, *therefore* he concludes that God is irrelevant and turns to others or to himself. No, that's not what it says. It says, "*My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you.*"
 - **This is why so much of what we do in corporate worship is simply to remember.** We're not trying to come up with anything new in our service. We're trying to remember the old, old story. We're retelling it to ourselves and to our children because we're all so prone to forget. In our songs, in our sermons, and especially in the Supper, we're bringing to remembrance the faithfulness of God. **We're trying to remember his steadfast love to us in the past to strengthen our faith for today and our hope for tomorrow.**
- ❖ **Second, notice how the psalmist is praying.** God feels distant to him. It feels like God's deserted him, forgotten him, rejected him. **But here he is – still praying to the God who feels distant.** He's pleading to the God who he feels has abandoned him.
 - If that makes no sense to you, if you haven't developed that discipline of being able to pray to God when you can't feel God – then you're not going to get very deep in your relationship with him. If you're only driven by emotions, then spiritual depression will drive you even further from the practice of prayer.
- ❖ **One aspect of growing in spiritual maturity is to learn how to pray even when you feel spiritually dry or depressed.** Look at v9. The psalmist didn't just tell others that he feels like God has forgotten him. He actually says that to God, "*Why have you forgotten me?*" Have you ever prayed like that? **Have you ever expressed your doubts and frustrations about God to God like that?** Some of you aren't sure if you're allowed to do that. Here the psalmist is giving you permission to pray like that.

- ❖ But notice how he addresses that prayer in v9 to God – his rock. **So it's a raw prayer but it's still a prayer based on his remembrance that God is a rock.** Right now, the psalmist feels overwhelmed by God's breakers and waves. He feels like he's drowning. But he remembers that God is his rock. He can ride out the storm clinging to his rock and to that lifeline of his steadfast love. That leads us to our final cure.
- ❖ **Third, notice how the psalmist is preaching to himself.** Look back to that common refrain starting in v5, "*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.*" **Notice how he's speaking to himself.** He's having a whole conversation. He's questioning himself and telling himself to hope in God, to believe he'll return to the temple to praise the God of his salvation.
- ❖ **This idea of preaching to yourself is not some form of psychological babble.** Speaking to yourself is not a psychiatric problem of having split personalities. No, this is a spiritual discipline. One that many Christians overlook. If you don't know what it means to speak and preach to your own soul, then I can imagine why the darkness never seems to lift. **You're spending far too much time listening to yourself (and letting that voice influence you), rather than speaking to yourself and pointing your own soul to its hope in God.**
 - I learned this from Lloyd-Jones's book *Spiritual Depression*. In his chapter on Psalm 42 he writes this, "*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?*" **He says that's the main trouble with spiritual depression – we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self.**
 - His point is we get too self-absorbed. If we continue to neglect God's Word and pull away from God's people, we'll end up in an echo chamber of self-reinforcing thoughts and feelings. His point is that sometimes we need to stop listening to that voice in our head and to speak back to it with words of hope.
- ❖ **That's what it means to preach the gospel to yourself.** That's what the psalmist is doing. He's saying, "Listen soul, why are you downcast? Why are you in turmoil? Hope in God. You're going to see the temple and praise him with the company of saints again. You'll get a chance to be in the presence of God again." Remember, for Old Testament saints the temple represented the very presence of God. That's why it was so important.
 - **But when we get to the New Testament, Jesus arrives on the scene claiming to be the new Temple** (Jn. 2:19). He's the new meeting place of God. In him the whole fullness of God dwells bodily (Col. 2:9). If you want to appear before God, you don't go to a building or a place anymore. You go to a person. To the Son of God.
- ❖ **Friends, this we can join the psalmist by directing our souls to the new Temple, to Christ.** Preach to yourself saying, "Listen soul, why are you downcast? Why are you in turmoil? Hope in God. If you want to appear before him, go to the new Temple. You'll always find God in the person of the Son."

- ❖ Listen, if you're dealing with spiritual depression right now, I'm sure you have a lot of voices coming at you. **And I'm not surprised if the loudest and clearest of them all is that voice that says you're not worthy.** It's the taunt that says you're not worthy to appear before God.
 - **Friend, the first step to get that dark cloud to lift over your soul is to admit the voice is right.** To acknowledge your sinfulness. To confess your unrighteousness. The hope of the gospel is that God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That's why he sent his Son Jesus.
 - In Psalm 43:3, the psalmist asks God to, "*Send out your light and your truth.*" To lead him to the holy hill, to the temple, to his presence. **The good news is that God has ultimately answered that prayer by sending The Light and The Truth in the person of his Son.**

- ❖ If guilt and shame are weighing heavy on you, like a thick cloud blocking out the light, like a thick blanket cutting off your air, then put your hope in the Son of God. It's his steadfast love that'll be your lifeline. It's Jesus who will vindicate you. Jesus who will justify you by his blood and righteousness. Jesus who makes you worthy.
 - **It was Jesus who endured the ultimate thirst** as he hung there on the cross panting for God (Jn. 19:28). **It was Jesus who experienced the ultimate desertion** as he was forsaken by his Father, forgotten and rejected (Mk. 15:34).
 - He did that for sinners like us. So that we would never thirst. So we would never be forgotten and never be forsaken. **He did that for those who admit that we're not worthy in ourselves, but who believe that, in Christ, we are counted worthy to appear before God.**

- ❖ Now I'm not going to promise that if you trust in Jesus, that suddenly your spiritual depression will be cured, and that it'll become a thing of the past never to haunt you again. I'm not going to say that. But I am going to say that Jesus secures our eternal hope that the darkness will not last forever, that we will rise one day and once again praise our God.