

February 3, 2008

## “Spiritual Depression” Psalms 42-43

FCF: Struggle with spiritual depression – the felt absence of God

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) God is our soul’s rest.

(magnet) And so we must look to Him in times of spiritual depression.

### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Becoming a Christian changes everything. One’s standing before God is secured; there’s nothing to prove, no masks to wear. But there are some things that do not change – one’s physical constitution or temperament. Some are more prone to melancholy and depression than others. And it’s that struggle I want to consider this morning.

What is “spiritual depression?” To get at that, I need to say a few things from the start. First, different causes may well be at work. I’ve alluded to that already. Second, these causes are often interconnected – mind, body, and spirit. We are complex creatures such that one can affect the others. Yet the spirit is real and it is worth considering.

We know this from the lives of Martin Luther, John Bunyan, William Cowper, and Charles Spurgeon. Going further back, we see Moses cracking under the pressures of leadership. Elijah in flight from Jezebel. Job wishing he had never been born. Jonah wanting it all to end. Indeed, it’s safe to say that the frequency in which we find this in the Scriptures tells us at least these two things. First, such depression is a common thing. It’s a common thing. And it’s God’s desire to lead His people through it. But how?

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Psalms 42-43](#)

### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Let me start by pointing out that these two psalms are really two parts of one prayer. There is but one title for the two. And then we see these common refrains and the repeated questions. So what we have here are really two parts of one longer prayer.

And in that we have a window into the heart of the psalmist. This is anything but a mountain top experience he is describing. It’s a time of vexation in the valley. The depth and severity of his suffering is clear – intense emotional pain. 42:3 indicates a constant oppression of the soul. The refrain of 42:5, 42:11 and 43:5 speak of the deepest despair. He is “cast down,” meaning brought low, collapsed to the ground, the agony of loss and grief. He speaks of “turmoil within,” like a dog’s howling, a deep guttural sobbing. He speaks in 42:1 of being like a deer longing for flowing streams, conjuring images of parched soil, cracked earth, and a panting creature searching with thirst.

This is what could be described as “the dark night of the soul.” Such is the spiritual condition of the patient. But what are the causes? What is the cure? And what can we glean from this that we might find solace for ourselves when the darkness presses in upon us? At least this much: God is our soul’s rest. And so we must look to Him. God is our soul’s rest and so we must look to Him in such times of darkness and thirst.

### **I. THE CAUSES**

That said, what are the causes of this depression? Why is he feeling this way?

#### *A) A Felt Absence*

Two things. First, the felt absence of God. There are allusions here to a forced separation from the Temple and public worship, implying an estrangement from God.

##### 1. The drought (42:1-5)

God is absent. In 42:1-5, the image is of a drought ([READ Psalm 42:2](#)). “When?” he cries as he then harkens back to a time when that intimacy had been sweet.

## 2. The depths (42:6-11)

In 42:6-11, the imagery shifts from drought to depths, a flooding (**READ Psalm 42:7**). His thoughts are as tumultuous as these waters, wave on wave threatening to drown him.

Yet note this. Faith keeps asserting itself. He still remembers. He recognizes these as being “your” waterfalls, breakers, and waves. So we see this tension – an assurance of God’s presence in 42:8 and a woundedness for His absence in 42:9-10.

All which then leads to this twofold “why” (**READ Psalm 43:2**). He loves and longs for God. But his circumstances seem to say he’s been cast off. So, in 43:3, he prays for God’s “light and truth” to lead him back – like guides through this desert.

### B) *A Constant Presence*

So the first cause of his depression is the felt absence of God. But the second is this – a constant presence of enemies, making it all the worse (**READ Psalm 42:3**).

#### 1. What they were doing

We’re not sure exactly what was going on here. It would seem he’s vulnerable to attack because he’s openly declared his faith – a faith they now ridicule crying, “Where is your God?” The psalmist is suffering. And they are tearing open the wound all the wider, pouring in the salt, doing all they can to undermine his faith. “Where is your God?”

#### 2. The effect upon the psalmist

A question with which he was already intensely struggling. And they are making it all the worse. God seemed inactive, invisible. And with their taunts, the psalmist feels forgotten, bruised, and rejected all the more (**READ Psalms 42:9-10**).

His heart is broken. God is absent. And his enemies exploiting the opportunity.

### *Application:*

Again, we don’t know their reasons. And that’s just as well since it broadens the application to us all the more. In the psalmist’s distress, we need to see there can be parallels to our own. We too have times of God’s felt absence and an enemy’s presence – the enemy of our very souls. “*God is not strong. He cannot help you. God is not good. He does not care. God isn’t there. There are no promises. There is no presence.*”

At least part of the treatment entails candid honesty with ourselves and before God as to what we’re feeling. And what are we feeling? Is it disappointment – the loss of a dream that once seemed perfectly reasonable? Our health, a home, a satisfying career, the loyalty of friends, a stable family life – all perfectly reasonable longings. But often held to without taking into account the depths of the Fall. What disappointments are you facing? What of distress – a loss of direction, not being sure of what to do or where to turn? What of despair – a loss of hope, no ability to see a way out or the possibility of anything good? What are we feeling? Again, let me come back to this. God is our soul’s rest. And we need to ask such questions while holding to that.

## II. THE CURE

Such were the causes. What of the cure? What does he do? What can we learn?

### A) *Talking to Ourselves*

The first step would seem to be simply this – talking to ourselves. Talking to ourselves. Believe it or not, not the first sign of insanity but the first step towards sanity.

#### 1. Asking questions

Asking questions. Not just what we’re feeling but why? Note again the refrain (**READ Psalm 42:5**). “*What’s going on? Where is your trust? In whom or what is your hope?*”

#### 2. Pressing truth

Asking questions and then pressing truth. It's almost as if he grabs himself by the scruff of the neck and says, "*Remember the truth!*" Three times we see this – the asking and the pressing. He does not give in to his mood but takes himself in hand. He questions, interrogates, reproaches himself. "*You know what and who is real. Trust in God!*"

### B) *Talking to God*

So the cure, the first step towards spiritual sanity is actually talking to ourselves. Which then frees and leads him to take the second step – talking to God. This is a prayer.

#### 1. He does not give up

Despite the struggle, he does not give up. He thirsts and so he searches for the water. He remembers, he calls to mind what he has known. He pursues the Lover of his soul, his great delight, and the theme of his song (**READ Psalm 43:4**). He does not give up.

#### 2. He presses yet harder

In fact, the drought, the depths, and the derision just cause him to press yet harder. In 42:4, he pours out his soul. In 42:9, there's a twofold why. In 43:1, he cries out for God to vindicate, to defend, to deliver him. In 43:2, yet another twofold why. 43:3, he asks to be led back. And then in 43:4, the assertion of praise that will yet come again.

Now note this. This is all here in the psalms – the prayer book for the people of God. Which means this is not just for him. It's for us – all of us. We are to do such talking – to ourselves and to God. Think back to Luke 18 and the parable of the widow.

#### *Application:*

God shows us the cause and He shows us the cure. And we need to take it and ourselves in hand. We don't stop crying out to God because He feels distant. We press on further. Our despair is to press us harder, even if we feel like we're on Mount Hermon, as far away as we can imagine from Jerusalem. We go to Him still.

Many would say in such times you just need to repent and move on. Others would say you just need to accept yourself and move on. That's not what God says. He says, "*Move to me. Talk to yourself and talk to Me.*" And in His mercy, He will use such times to expose what really needs to be brought to light – the idols of our hearts, the things in our lives we're clinging to tighter than God, the things we've made as our god. He'll expose it, bring it to light. And then, as we come to rest in Him anew, set us free.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Now let me make a candid confession. Early on this week, as I was pouring over these words, I found myself saying, "*Is that it?*" I mean, I know the psalms beautifully express the whole range of human experience. And I know they've been given to us to guide us through that experience. And the honesty here is so refreshing and appealing. But is that it? How do I come to a point of actually being able to say these things? I don't know if that's where you are but, if so, let me give you a threefold encouragement.

Let the Holy Spirit take these words and lead you by the hand from where you are to where you need to be. Know that such cries were upon the heart and lips of Jesus. He knows what this feels like at the deepest level and can empathize beyond our imagining. And be assured of the love of the Father for you, the Father who gave His Son and sent His Spirit that we might have life and in the full. We need not doubt in any way His care and compassion for us. Listen. Do not let your circumstances form your view of who God is. Let His love form the grid through which you see your circumstances and praise Him for giving us these words upon which we can stand. Let's pray to Him now.

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