

A Song for the Weary

*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 (Psalm 42:5 ESV)*

A Song for the Weary

January 10th, 2020

Psalm 42-43

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 42.

Over the next few months, we are going to be walking through the Apostles Creed and the plan was to start that series today. However, some circumstances have caused us to push the series back one week and it left me free to choose any text for our time together this morning.

Almost immediately, my heart was drawn to Psalm 42. We're going to be reading both Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 today because they are widely considered to be one song – a song that could be appropriately titled: A song for the weary heart. Commentator Alec Motyer describes this text as:

a case-study in dealing with a downcast spirit.¹

Now, some of you who are listening now have never felt better! The worst of this pandemic seems to be behind us! The days are getting longer! There are weddings being planned and babies being born, and we have countless reasons to rejoice! Yes! And we rejoice with you! But this morning, I want to invite those of you who are in a season of rejoicing to take a moment to weep with those who are weeping. As we empathize with one another, we obey the Apostle Paul's command:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15 ESV)

¹ A. Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 111.

There has been a great deal of weeping in our church this past year. Our knee jerk response is to say, “Well, there have been harder times.” Of course, that’s true. And there will be harder days to come, I’m sure. But whether grief is big or small, it is still grief. And the Bible gives us full permission to lay that grief on the table.

There are people in our congregation who have lost their livelihood this year. We have healthcare workers who have been pushed to the extreme and who are feeling that strain in their homes. We have single brothers and sisters who have been forced to spend a year isolated in their apartments. Some of us haven’t been able to see our grandparents. Some of us haven’t been able to visit our sick loved ones in the hospital. Phil and Rosemarie are currently in Thailand trying to bring home their son, and yet the restrictions and the policies are changing every hour. Henry and Norma went home to be with the Lord this year, and we didn’t have the opportunity to say goodbye as a church family. We haven’t been able to sing together, to hug one another, to watch our kids laugh and play together, and yes, I know that there have been harder days, and yes, I know that we will come through this, but nevertheless, some of us are feeling weary.

And that’s okay. Our text this morning reminds us that weariness and depression and despondency are all a natural part of the Christian life. In fact, the Bible teaches us that these seasons of adversity are ultimately good for our souls. One commentator notes:

Prosperity and adversity are the wise and necessary mixture of the saint’s condition.²

The author of Ecclesiastes similarly wrote:

It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart. (Ecclesiastes 7:2 ESV)

There are lessons to be learned in grief and discouragement that can’t be learned elsewhere.

² Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 249.

That being said, there is a reason why God has wired us to long for the day when He will wipe every tear from our eyes. We learn in our brokenness, yes. But we LONG for restoration. And so we should! Things are not now as they should be! It's appropriate to see that, to feel that, and to GRIEVE that.

That's what our text this morning is about. This is a song that God gave to us to voice our longing for restoration in a season of brokenness. This is a song for the weary.

A Song for the Weary

If you have your Bible open in front of you, you should be able to see very clearly the form of this song. If you look closely you can see three verses divided by one repeating chorus. The verses give voice to the various circumstances and problems that the psalmist faces, and then the chorus voices his resolve in spite of those problems. For example, last week we sang Blessed Be The Name of the Lord by Matt Redman. The structure of that song was exactly like the structure of this psalm. We sang four verses that presented various circumstances like, for example:

Blessed be your name on the road marked with suffering,
Though there's pain in the offering, blessed be your name.

But those circumstances lead into the repeating chorus where we proclaim:

Every blessing you pour out I'll turn back to praise.
When the darkness closes in Lord, still I will say,
Blessed be the name of the Lord!³

We find the same structure here. If you look down at your Bible, you will see the repeated chorus in verses 5 and 11 of chapter 42 and in verse 5 of chapter 43. Because the chorus is meant to function as the climax of the song, we're going to consider it last. Let's begin by considering the three verses of this song. We find the first in verses 1-4. Look there with me now:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

³ Technically, this is the pre-chorus and the chorus, but contemporary worship nomenclature is not the topic of the morning.

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 the day long,
“Where is your God?”
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. (Psalm 42:1-4 ESV)

In the verses of this song, the psalmist is bringing big, painful questions to God. I think we can summarize the first verse of this song with the question:

Verse 1: When will I worship with God’s people again?

Commentators have a number of suggestions as to why this psalmist was separated from corporate worship, but the *reason* for this separation really isn’t the point. The point is the *devastation* of the separation. Something has happened and, as a result, the psalmist hasn’t been able to worship together with God’s people at the temple for a long time. And he is feeling that deep in his bones. He is longing and thirsting for corporate worship like a deer pants for water. His grief has become so great that he has lost his appetite altogether. In verse 4 he daydreams about those sweet times when he would enter into the Lord’s house with a great crowd and sing and shout together to the glory of God.

I have studied this Psalm and meditated on this Psalm on numerous occasions, but this first stanza never resonated with me. I would try to put myself in the shoes of the Israelites as they were carried away to Babylon, or I would try to put myself in the shoes of the persecuted church today. If I imagined hard enough, I’d be able to agree intellectually that, yes, I would really miss corporate worship if it was stripped from me. Theoretically, I understood these verses.

However, this first stanza became real to me this year. I confess that there were times in the first lockdown when I was experiencing the worst depression of my life. Being separated from the people of God – going weeks and months without worshiping together in the Lord’s house – took

a real, physical, spiritual toll on me. And no, it wasn't persecution, and no, it is not in any way comparable to what the Israelites faced as they were dragged away to Babylon. But I still felt it deeply, and I know that many of you did as well. As we should. Matthew Henry says here:

Sometimes God teaches us effectually to know the worth of mercies by the want of them, and whets our appetite for the means of grace, by cutting us short in those means.⁴

If there was any part of me that thought that I could survive without regularly gathering together to worship with the people of God, that part of me died a gruesome death this year. I will never let my kid's sports programs, or my summer plans, or my job take me away from the corporate gathering. Not a chance. Because I need this. And my family needs this. The psalmist needs this. And you need this too.

This grief that we are feeling over our separation is healthy. The puritan William Plumer notes:

It is better to weep and cry for lost spiritual privileges and comforts with a relish even for their memory, than it is to be at ease in the fulness of earthly comforts.⁵

In fact, I would go so far as to say that if you *didn't* feel the loss of corporate worship this year – if you found yourself saying, “I could get used to this!” – then you need to do some business with the Lord. We were made to worship. And we were made to worship together. We SHOULD feel very uncomfortable until we're able to do that together again. We should be singing with the psalmist: When will I worship with God's people again?

That is the first stanza of this song for the weary. We find the second in verses 6-10. Look there with me now:

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves

⁴ Matthew Henry as quoted by William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 499.

⁵ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 499.

have gone over me.
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.
⁹ I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”
¹⁰ 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?” (Psalm 42:6b-10 ESV)

There is a lot here, but I think we can summarize this second verse with the question:

Verse 2: Why have you forgotten me?

These words painfully describe the sinking believer who is holding onto his faith by the skin of his teeth. He hasn't surrendered to his circumstances, but his troubles won't seem to relent. In verse 6, he says:

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar. (Psalm 42:6 ESV)

The significance of these places is that they are all places that are not home. Even as the psalmist is driven farther and farther from where he wants to be, he says: “I remember you even there!”

But then God sends waves and waterfalls to crash over him. And yes, you heard me right – GOD SENDS the waves to crash on this weary Christian. He laments:

Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all **your** breakers and **your** waves
have gone over me. (Psalm 42:7 ESV)

That's the problem with good theology. It would be much easier for the psalmist to say, “The WORLD keeps throwing hardships at me! The ENEMY is kicking me while I'm down!” But he

can't do that. Because he knows that his God is sovereign, and he knows that his God is the Lord of the wind and the waves and so, as each passing wave pushes him deeper into the depths, he has no confusion as to Who sent them. It was the Lord.

But he keeps praying. Night and day he prays. And his enemies watch him as he sinks into the depths of despair and they mock him saying:

“Where is your God?” (Psalm 42:10b ESV)

And the truth is, he's asking the same question. Where is God? Why are all of these prayers seemingly going unanswered? Have I been forgotten, even by God Himself?

That's an honest verse, isn't it?

If I could be candid with you, one of the things that I like the least about being a pastor is having a front row seat while God sends another wave over a broken, weary Christian.

I know that He loves us. I know that He's sovereign. I know that all things are working together for the good of those who love Him. I believe that these afflictions are light and momentary. I believe all of these precious truths. But when your weary sister in Christ looks you in the eyes after one more unimaginable loss and asks, “How is God working this for my good? I haven't caught my breath from the last wave! I haven't repaired the windows from the last storm!” What do you say?

Should you remind them of God's promises? Eventually you should.

But the appropriate response to the kind of deep grief that we see in this Psalm is probably the response that we see modeled in the book of Job. Job's friends made some serious mistakes when they opened their mouths, but their initial instinct was a good one:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, **they came** each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. ¹² And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. **And**

they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. ¹³ **And they sat with him** on the ground seven days and seven nights, **and no one spoke a word to him**, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:11-13 ESV)

They came. And they wept. And they sat with him. And no one spoke a word.

Sometimes there is nothing that you can say. Sometimes, the only thing we can offer is our presence. And sometimes, that's all that is needed. Weary people are often lonely people. Our culture like to dance. Our culture likes to laugh. So, when you're sitting in the darkness you often find yourself sitting alone. Again, William Plumer says it so well:

They who can do nothing but shed tears, commonly must shed those tears alone. Mankind are so busy, each one with his own affairs, the human heart has so little genuine philanthropy in it, and overtures of sympathy have been so often met with ingratitude, that sadness is commonly left solitary.⁶

Let that not be true among us.

But thankfully, even when the world fails you and even when the church fails you, your God will never fail you. And he invites you to bring that frustrated, despairing song right into His throne room. He even wrote down the lyrics for you. It is not inappropriate to sing: Why have you forgotten me?

Finally, we find the third verse in chapter 43. Look there with me:

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!

² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?

Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?

³ Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!

⁶ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 495-496.

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy,
and I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God. (Psalm 43:1-4 ESV)

We can summarize this final verse with the question:

Verse 3: Why won't you save me?

Here, the psalmist is facing opposition from his enemies. His foes have surrounded him. That shouldn't be a problem though, should it? Last week we read and delighted in Psalm 46 where the Psalmist declared:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea (Psalm 46:1-2 ESV)

We don't need to fear! God is with us! And He fights for us! And He is our refuge! Amen? Amen!

And yet, as if reflecting on Psalm 46, our psalmist says in verse 2:

For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?
Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy? (Psalm 43:2 ESV)

It's as if he is saying, "I was shouting 'AMEN!' and furiously making notes during last week's sermon! You ARE my refuge. I BELIEVE that! ... So, where are you?"

Listen: God will ALWAYS keep His promises. He WILL protect you from the evil one. He WILL vindicate you. He IS your refuge, and He WILL deliver!

But sometimes God's deliverance doesn't look like what we had in mind. Habakkuk prayed that God would bring about a revival in Israel, and God answered that prayer by sending the Babylonians to bring His people into exile. That wasn't the revival that Habakkuk had in mind, but it was what was needed. The Israelites prayed that their Messiah would come, but they weren't

ready for a crucified king. That wasn't the Messiah they expected. The early church prayed that the good news of the Gospel would spread to the nations, but little did they know that persecution would be the driving force that would spread Christianity to the corners of the earth. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

That is a long way of saying, in the Christian life, even our WINNING sometimes feels like losing in this broken world. This third verse laments the reality that the deliverance that we long for often looks and feels like desertion. The fact that God has written this song into our song book is a likely indicator that we will all feel this at one time or another.

It doesn't mean that you're broken.

It doesn't mean that your faith isn't real.

It means that you live in a fallen world and that you see through a glass dimly.

Even the great missionary Adoniram Judson faced these seasons of despondency and depression. He once wrote in his journal:

God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not.⁷

Perhaps you've written something similar over the course of this year. Let this Psalm remind you that it is not unnatural for you to feel broken. Let this Psalm remind you that you are invited to bring these deep, painful questions to God.

We conclude now with the chorus. We find it repeated after each of these three verses. Look, for example, at verse 5 of Psalm 43:

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. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

⁷ Adoniram Judson as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 129.

The verses all presented questions to God, but the chorus turns the interrogation back upon the psalmist. The psalmist asks himself:

Chorus: Why are you cast down, o my soul?

I'm sure that you have heard this famous quote by Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, but I want to remind you of it once more. This is one of those quotes that you would do well to memorize. Reflecting on this chorus, he notes:

Have you not realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?⁸

These questions ring out in our hearts all day long. The narrative continues to spin, and the doubts creep in, and the fear bubbles up, and all day long we listen to this inner chaos. But this Psalm teaches us a truth that is painful to hear and hard to obey. It teaches us that, after listening to that inner chaos and after bringing our frustrations and our questions and our doubts to God, we have to do the hard work of preaching to ourselves. We have to point the finger at the person looking back at us in the mirror and we need to say, "Now, you! You know that God is in control and you know that His is good so why are you allowing yourself to crash? Hope in the Lord!" Lloyd Jones goes on to say:

The essence of this matter is to understand that this self of ours, this other man within us, has got to be handled. Do not listen to him; turn on him; speak to him; condemn him; upbraid him; exhort him; encourage him; remind him of what you know, instead of listening placidly to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you.⁹

Sometimes it feels like we don't control the dial for the discouraging and despairing voices in our heads and in our hearts. And perhaps you don't. Perhaps, for a season, you can't turn the volume down on that sad song of lament that is playing on repeat.

So preach louder.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 20.

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 21.

If the internal voice of despair is loud, then preach a sermon of hope to your heart with all the volume that you can muster. And then preach it again. And then preach it again. That's what the psalmist models for us here! He has to come back to this chorus THREE TIMES! He has to interrupt his thoughts again and again. He refuses to allow the despair to have the final word.

Christian, your sadness, your depression, your weariness and your despondency is not an abnormality. This season that you are in is part and parcel of the Christian life. Like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we all eventually take a turn in the dungeon of despair. Some of us, for reasons that are beyond our knowing, are forced to stay in that dungeon for longer than others. But, like Christian, each of us possesses the way of escape. The key of the promises of God is clutched in your hand. So, hope in the Lord! Don't let go of that key! Hold onto Jesus Christ with all of your might and believe in faith that a day will come when that door will open! The cloud will be lifted! The sun will shine again! William Plumer says here:

If temptation is sore, if afflictions multiply, if enemies are many and powerful, let us hold fast and firm God and his truth. The more terrible the storm, the more necessary is the anchor.¹⁰

Amen. The more terrible the storm, the more necessary is the anchor. And Christian, you have an anchor that will never fail you! You have a Saviour who has already passed through the depths of the deepest darkness and who has come out victoriously on the other side. He entered into that darkness to purchase your freedom! That's how much your God loves you!

So, when He sends a wave crashing over your head – when He withholds the answer that you are desperate for – when He leaves you to linger in a dungeon of discouragement – you can KNOW that His plan for you is good. He loves you. Contrary to how you feel:

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18 ESV)

¹⁰ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 503.

The Lord is near. And so too are His people. You're not alone. If you're in that dark place, reach out. I've had many seasons in my life now when my grip was slipping, and my sermon was waning, and I needed a brother to close my fingers back around the key and to preach the sermon where my voice had dropped off. We are with you.

So, Christian. Preach to yourself. Preach it loud and preach it often.

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. (Psalm 43:5 ESV)

This is a song for the weary. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.