

Psalm 43 “Hope for the Downcast”
(Read Psalms 42-43)

April 7, 2013

Why are you cast down, O my soul?
 Why are you in turmoil within me?

One thing that you notice when you preach through the whole Bible
 is that the Bible is not especially a “happy” book.
Danger, difficulty or despair can be found on almost every page!

But the Bible is most profoundly a *hopeful* book.
 Psalms 42-43 exemplify this rather clearly.
 The Psalmist is not presently *happy*,
 but he is *hopeful*.
The present is not especially cheerful.
But my future is in the hands of the living God –
 and therefore I have hope.

The refrain of Psalms 42-43 is echoed by our Lord:
 “Now is my soul troubled.” (John 12:27)
 “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” (Matthew 26:38)

 In both cases, this is the same word translated “cast down” in Psalm 42-43.

As Jesus came to the night that he was betrayed,
 his soul was downcast – sorrowful – troubled.

The echo of Psalm 42 is intentional –
 especially when you connect it with the theme of Psalm 43 –
 “Why have you, O God, rejected me?”
Jesus was downcast, not just because of the oppression of his enemies,
 but because the Father himself turned his back on his only Son.

In Psalm 42, verses 3 and 10, we hear the mockery of the scoffers:
 while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
This question haunts the Psalmist’s footsteps:
 Where is your God?
In the midst of trial and suffering,
 where is your God?

No doubt you have wondered that at times.
 Where is God when I am suffering?
 Where is God when I am depressed?

–when my soul is cast down and in turmoil within me?

A few years ago I preached through a portion of Book 2 of the Psalms.

I left aside a number of Psalms,

mostly because I didn't like the music we had in our Psalter!

So I waited until we would have the new editions in the pew!

Psalm 42 is the first Psalm in book 2 of the Psalter.

The Psalter is divided into five books (like the five books of Moses),

and book two opens with several Psalms from the sons of Korah.

It is likely that Psalms 42-43 were originally one song.

Certainly they share a common refrain (42:5, 11, 43:5)

and the thematic connection is very strong.

Several Hebrew manuscripts treat them as a single song.

All the other Psalms in this series, 42-49, are attributed to the Sons of Korah –

Psalm 43 has no inscription.

Indeed, the big question is that *if* they were a single song,

how did someone come up with the idea of splitting them apart?!

So, it is likely that Psalms 42-43 were composed together.

The other option is that Psalm 42 was written first,

and someone later wrote Psalm 43 as a response/conclusion to Psalm 42.

Either way, that means that we should consider them together!

But its location is curious:

“I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon.”

This is the headwaters of the Jordan –

outside the land of Israel –

(around 70 miles north of the Sea of Galilee).

It is closer to Damascus – in Syria – or Tyre and Sidon –

than to Jerusalem.

At the same time, it seems to assume that the temple is still standing

(not only does he remember the house of God 42:4,

but he speaks of going to the altar of God (43:4).

There are adversaries taunting him –

and enemies oppressing him –

so there are lots of possible settings:

he could be a hostage, or captive, during the time of the Davidic kings,

or he could be a faithful Yahweh-worshiper

who for some reason resides on the fringes of the northern kingdom;

he could be a faithful Levite of the northern kingdom,
longing for the day when Ahab or Jehu would let him go to Jerusalem
for that matter, it could be a Levite in Jerusalem
writing imaginatively of the situation of the northern saints.

We cannot reconstruct the original setting.
But whatever the setting,
the song is the cry of those who feel keenly the misery of their distance from God.

The OT saints longed to be *near* God.
The psalms of the Sons of Korah express this regularly (think of Psalms 46, 48, or 84),
and they felt deeply the pain of being far from God –
think of Psalms 44, 85, or 88.
And in the OT, the way to be near God was to be in Jerusalem.
After all, the name of God dwelt in the temple.

Mt Hermon resides at the very edge of memory.
At the headwaters of the Jordan – at the raging torrents of the northern mountains –
you are almost beyond sight of the Promised Land.

The Psalms of the sons of Korah often have this sense of distance.
Whoever wrote them, they tend to have northern sympathies.
Some have even suggested that they were written by saints in the northern kingdom
(perhaps the faithful remnant in the circle of Elijah and Elisha),
and that they were brought to Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria
in the days of Hezekiah.
They have northern sympathies –
but they still long for Jerusalem.

The closer you are to Jerusalem, the closer you are to God.
But this means that the further you are from Jerusalem, the further you are from God.

We need to remember that this is still true –
not literally! – but the Jerusalem above – the heavenly city – is our true home.

When Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that true worshipers will worship in Spirit and in truth,
he was saying that the *earthly* location does not matter.

But there is still one – and only one – place to worship God: namely, the Spirit and truth!
“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.”

Psalms 42 is a song for people in distress.
The Psalmist goes about in mourning because of the powers arrayed against him.
His enemies revile and mock him.

And yet he longs for the place of God's presence.

When we look Psalms 42-43 together,
we see a movement from despair to hope in the three sections.

As Craigie puts it,

“After each lament, the refrain recalls the possibility of future praise,
and in the prayer of the third part of the psalm,
the movement occurs which begins to make the possibility a reality” (325).

Because in the third part of the song,
the Psalmist moves from talking *about* God
to talking *to* God!

And that's the point.

If you're just talking *about* God, then you are not really getting to the heart of the solution
In Psalm 42, the Psalmist dabbles with prayer,
but spends more time talking to himself, than talking to God.

And sometimes that's where you start!
Notice verses 1-2.

1. Talking About God: Psalm 42 as Prelude to Psalm 43

a. Panting for God: Where Is God in the Midst of Tears? (42:1-5)

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

² *My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

When shall I come and appear before God?^[b]

Verse 1 starts by addressing “you, O God” – my soul pants for *you*.

But then, in verse 2, the Psalmist begins to reflect on the problem.

Verse 6 also opens by remembering “you” –

but then by verse 8, he is speaking of God in the third person,
and resorts to remembering former prayers!

Now, this is not wrong!

Sometimes this is simply where you are!

But it's not your goal.

You don't want to be cast down and despondent!

You don't want to be alienated and alone!

You want to be *near* God –

but sometimes you are not.

Psalm 42 focuses our attention on the relationship between God and “my soul.”

It is a profoundly personal Psalm.

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

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God.

I’m thirsty.

I long to drink deeply of the living water that flows from the throne of God.

Jesus said in John 7, at the feast of tabernacles,

if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Jesus is the one who can satisfy your thirst.

If you drink ordinary water, you will be thirsty soon.

But if you drink the water that Jesus gives, you will never thirst again!

The presence of the living God is the only thing that can satisfy your soul.

God made us to have fellowship with himself.

He designed us to worship him.

And so we go through life looking for someone to worship.

We go through life thirsting for relationships that will satisfy us.

And we keep trying to fill that void within us.

We stuff all sorts of things into our lives:

work, money, sex, power, family...

But none of it fits.

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.

The Psalmist was brought to a point of despair.

I have no appetite.

My enemies surround me—

they mock me continually – Where is your God?!

Where is my God?

I don’t know.

This is a very personal Psalm – focused on God and “my soul” –
and yet what keeps the Psalmist going is this memory of the people of God.
I remember what it was like!
I remember the way it used to be – the way it should be –
when the people of God would gather together, keeping festival before God.

⁵ *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^[c] ⁶ and my God.*

Why are you cast down?
Why are you discouraged?
Why is my soul in turmoil within me?

Nowadays we use the word “depression.”
The Christian will face times of depression.
Why?
Because not all is right with the world.

But even though all is not right with the world,
we hope in God.
Hope is the key!
If everything was just peachy,
then you wouldn’t need hope.
Who hopes for what he already has?

Of course the second stanza of Psalm 42 tells us that our problem is worse than we thought.

b. Your Waves Have Gone over Me: Where is God in the Midst of Turmoil? (42:6-11)

*My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.*

The basic flow of verses 6-11 is that *I remember you* (verse 6)
but *you* have sent your waves and breakers over *me* (verse 7),
I know that your song is with me (verse 8),
but from where I sit, you appear to have forgotten me (verse 9),
and so my enemies laugh at me, because you are nowhere to be found (verse 10).

Our problem is worse than we thought.

It would be nice if the Psalmist had said,
 Ah, I've sinned against God, so now I will repent,
 and then God will immediately forgive me
 and then everything will be fine.
But that's not it.

God is the one who is doing this to me.

Too often, we think that we can manipulate God.
 If I just repent and fix my end of things, then God *has to bless me!*

Psalm 42 does not encourage that line of thinking.
⁷ *Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.*

The northern part of the Jordan River – near Mt Hermon –
 is a land of waterfalls and rivers.

But all of God's waters have gone over me (like Jonah).
 Jesus says in Luke 12:50 that he has a baptism to undergo,
 referring to his death.
 Baptism is a sign of judgment – God's judgment!
 In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul speaks of the crossing of the Red Sea as a baptism,
 and 1 Peter 3, Peter speaks of the Flood as a baptism.

In each of these OT baptisms, the water of judgment was poured out upon God's enemies,
 but the people of God were saved through water.

Here the Psalmist says that God's water of judgment has fallen upon himself.
 And in Jesus Christ that is exactly what has happened.
 Jesus is the singer of Psalm 42.
 The water of God's judgment was poured out upon Jesus,
 so that we might be saved through water.

The refrain in verses 5 and 11 tells us to hope in God,
 but verse 8 explains why we have hope.

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.*

This is the one reference to Yahweh in the Psalm.
Because even in the midst of turmoil and trouble,

the LORD commands his steadfast love.
Even as my soul is cast down –
at night his song is with me.

This is the key to crying out to God in the midst of depression and anxiety:

⁹ *I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”*

Even though life is a mess,
there is an underlying confidence in God.
God is my rock – even when nothing seems stable and certain.

In the first stanza, I remembered corporate worship.
In the second stanza, I remember God himself – the LORD, my rock!
And even when I think that he has forgotten me, I still confess that he is my rock.

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?”*

Jesus heard this mockery.
He saved others, let him save himself!
You claim that God is with you, well, where is he now?!

That is exactly where Jesus was when he cried out,
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

¹¹ *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.*

In the midst of turmoil,
where is your hope?

2. Talking to God: Psalm 43 as a Reply to Psalm 42

Perhaps the reason why Psalm 43 is listed as a separate Psalm
is because there is a significant change in tone.

As Craigie wisely notes:

“The Psalmist stops speaking to himself (Ps 42) and addresses his words to God (Ps 43),

[and] the beginning of deliverance is in sight.”
He notes further with keen pastoral insight,
“And again, the literary structure may reveal the solution for reality;
when one turns from the memories and burdens within the mind
and boldly addresses to God a plea for deliverance,
the first step is taken on the path that leads ultimately
to a restoration of the life of praise and to mental and spiritual health” (p. 329).

a. Being Direct with God (v1-2)

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

Verse 1 opens, “Vindicate me, O God” –
literally it simply reads, “Judge me, O God.”

The word simply means “to judge” or “decide” –
but a judgment, or a verdict, can go one of two ways.
In English, the verb “to judge” has connotations of “condemn” –
and so the translators rightly call attention to the fact that the Psalmist wants God
to judge *for me*:
“defend my cause.”

The adversaries in verse 10 were taunting and mocking him.
There is a legal dispute between himself and his adversaries.
And so the Psalmist uses legal language to express his plea.
He has a complaint against his enemies,
and so he brings his complaint to the highest court of appeals –
the throne of God.
He brings a *rib* – a cause (this is the term used by the prophets to speak of God’s
“covenant lawsuit” against Israel).
And in his complaint he declares that these people are not *hasid*.
In 42:8, he had declared that the LORD commands his *hesed* –
steadfast love – covenant faithfulness.
Now he says that these people – these *goy* – are not *hasid*.
They are not people characterized by covenant loyalty –
they are treacherous and unjust.

As one commentator puts it,
“They are slanderers and don’t respect the ninth commandment
because they do not understand – as the Psalmist does –
that a living relationship with YHWH

obligates one to charitable, honest relations.
They are a “faithless people” and therefore don’t incline themselves
towards the common courtesy (indeed common grace courtesy)
of dealing with others charitably and honestly.” [BE]

And so the Psalmist cries out, “deliver me” from such men.

*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?*

Remember verse 10 earlier – “Why have you forgotten me?”
God is my rock and my refuge – why are things not the way they should be?
If God is just – then he *will* deliver me from my oppressors.

Because of the refrain that we have heard in verses 5 and 11,
we know that the Psalmist has confidence – even in the midst of darkness –
and that confidence continues to grow in verses 3-4.

b. When Light and Truth Win, Worship Follows (v3-4)

*Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;*

Light and truth.

You would think that the connection between light and truth would be a common image.
After all, God’s word is a light that shines upon our path!

But in fact, this is the only verse in the Bible that juxtaposes these two words!
There’s a similar theme in Job 29:2-3,
when Job says, “Oh, that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me,
when his lamp shown upon my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness.”

Job likewise wanted vindication from God!

And John’s gospel speaks of how John bore witness to the light –
and speaks of how Jesus is the “true light” –
and how “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,
full of grace and truth.” (1:14)

But even John’s gospel never puts “light” and “truth” in the same verse!

The Psalmist asks God to let his light and truth lead him.
Where do light and truth lead?

*let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!*

As we saw in Psalm 42,
being away from the sanctuary means being away from the presence of God.
Therefore, as Hengstenberg says,
“The centre of all the Psalmist’s wishes is his return to the sanctuary,
because the exclusion from that was,
of all the marks of the divine displeasure under which he suffered,
the most palpable.
In his return to the sanctuary he would find a matter-of-fact justification,
a pledge of the return of God’s grace” (p. 105, Vol. 2).

He asked God for vindication –
he asked God for a favorable verdict:
“Vindicate me, O God!”
The greatest vindication of all would be to return to the altar –
to come to the holy mountain – the dwelling place of God!

And Jesus says that the holy mountain is no longer Jerusalem –
but the Spirit and truth!

And when vindication comes:
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.*

Four times in a single verse God is named.
I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy!
(or perhaps my “jubilant joy”).
Think of how excited people are when their sports’ team wins a big game –
we are in Final Four season, after all! –
the Psalmist says that this is the greatest joy he can imagine.

The worship of God *should be* our greatest joy.

Of course, notice the context of where this is said!
A Psalm of lament where the Psalmist is still stuck in one of the worst parts of the story!
To say that the worship of God should be an exceedingly joyous thing

does not mean that we always have to be “happy” when we come to worship.

What it means is that what really moves us to joy and celebration
is the triumph of Jesus over his enemies.

The vindication of Jesus – the resurrection of Jesus, when he was vindicated against his foes –
is what should get us pumped!

If you are more excited about Notre Dame basketball (or Michigan basketball)
than you are about the triumph of Jesus,
there is a problem!

c. Same Words – New Tone (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.*

Verse 5 now repeats the same refrain as we have heard twice before in Psalm 42 –
but now there is a new tone.

Where the first two refrains were “doggedly defiant” in spite of mockery (Kidner, 168),
this time there is a joyous and triumphant tone.

Of course, it’s worth pointing out that nothing has changed (outwardly).

The situation remains the same.

His enemies are still mocking.

God still appears to have rejected him.

Yet he has confidence that in the end, God will do what he has asked:

God will vindicate him at the final day.

Perhaps you hear the same movement in the words of our Savior:

there was the hour when he cried out,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

but then later he said,

“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

“Who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame.”

That is the joy of Psalm 43 –

an exceeding joy that is worth any cost!

And my prayer for you is that you will find that joy at the altar of God.