

Singing the Blues

Psalm 42

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So, I acknowledged to everyone yesterday, I love cats; not afraid to admit it. Yes, I love cats. But another thing about me is I love the blues. From my earliest years, the songs that played in my home were nothing by R&B. 90 percent of my parents' vinyl collection is all R&B. But it's one thing to grow up around it. It was another thing to love it on my own. And I remember when I was a young teenager, the ripe old age of 13, I remember hearing a song for the first time. And I said, I simply have to have more of that.

So, I went to the record store, this place called Sounds Familiar in South Carolina. I walked in and I went up to the desk. I could barely see over it. And they said, how can we help you? I said this is the song I'm looking for. It sounds like "Bad to the Bone." The guy laughed and he said, no, "Bad to the Bone" sounds like this. And he walked me over. And he took me to the blues section and gave me my very first album by Muddy Waters. It is still in my album collection. And I have, as my mother has always said, I've worn it out.

Singing the blues has been very much a part of my life. And so, this Psalm as I was preparing for it, I thought this is precisely the time to talk about it because this Psalm, as with many Psalms, is singing the blues. Now, this Psalm begins with, "As the deer pants for flowing streams." Now, I became a Christian in 1986. And that was just two years after the song was written, "As the Deer Pants," you know the song, right? I'm not going to sing it. But I remember hearing that song. And as I thought about it this week, I thought I really love the lyrics, but that music, nope. Because the lyrics fit the Psalm. It's from this Psalm. But the music doesn't fit this Psalm. It feels more like, if you will, that mid-80's Christian evangelical music thing. And it doesn't get to the heart of the gut-wrenching pain and suffering that's being talked about in this Psalm. Somebody needs to rewrite the music to that song, I think. Maybe Greg Richardson could do that.

But it is necessary that we understand that the Psalms, as we've been looking at the Psalms of lament, are not often written, if you will, in a major key. They are written in a minor key of suffering and heartache. This Psalm is no different. This Psalm forms the beginning of the second book of Psalms. And it represents a series of Psalms that have various authors, the sons of Korah, who were themselves temple musicians. These Psalms were sung. This one in particular was written by the sons of Korah as a part of the temple musician group. Asaph, the founder of another temple group, Psalm 50. David is the author of Psalms 51 through 65, 68 through 70. Solomon is an author of 72. And then there are also anonymous Psalms that make up this book from Psalms 42 to 72.

But they continue to form this series of Psalms as we've been looking specifically at Psalms of lament. And I want to tell you that this Psalm wasn't meant to go alone. It was actually meant to attend with Psalm 43. But they've been broken apart. But we'll look at Psalm 43 next week together. This week let's look together at Psalm 42.

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? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?" 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.

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. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan

and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" 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?"

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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me again?

Heavenly Father, we now ask that by the surgical divine power of the Holy Spirit that you would open up our hearts to receive the truth of this, your word, that we along with the sons of Korah would be able to sing the blues of our suffering and brokenness to you because you are our rock and our salvation. You are precisely the one to whom we sing. Help us to be honest about what we sing because you invite us with all that we have to come to you. Help us, we pray. And help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, as we look at this Psalm together, I want you to see first we have a thirsty soul, verses 1-6, a sovereign Lord, verses 7-9, and a firm foundation, verses 10-11. A thirsty soul, sovereign Lord, firm foundation.

A thirsty soul. You see as this Psalm opens, he's using the language of creation, he's using the metaphors of creation to be able to express what it is that he is experiencing. And they are singing to God. Now, what's rather astonishing, and we of course need to be reminded, that this is how God's people sang. We often do not sing like this anymore. And yet, we experience the very same kinds of things that the Psalm expresses. It is because as the writer Stephen Nichols wrote in his book *Getting the Blues: What Blues Music Teaches Us About Suffering and Salvation*, he points out that oftentimes, the Bible teaches us that we are to mourn, that we are to be ready and willing to express the brokenness that we experience. But oftentimes and on many different levels, we all too often try to construct our lives to avoid suffering at all costs. We live as if life should always be in the major key. In the process, we sometimes miss out on what can be learned from the minor key."

And so, the psalmist here is talking about his own experience of suffering. And he uses the metaphor of a thirsty deer, a deer which we can likely know and understand is perhaps being chased, certainly because he's using the language of enemies later on in the Psalm. But it's being pursued by a hunter. Maybe it recognizes it's hunted and it's thirsty. But there is this whole idea of this pounding thirst, and when you go thirsty, things begin to shut down.

It's July, so I have to talk about the Tour de France. What happens so often in the Tour de France, a cyclist can have a really great day. And the next day, things go dark. In cycling, we call that bonking because you haven't fueled enough. When you aren't fueling, everything shuts down. You simply have no energy. And here, he's using that language of panting with very low energy, "O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." So, he's using first as a part of a thirsty soul the minor key of our brokenness.

Now, that brokenness is not necessarily specified in the Psalm. It's one of these Psalms, if you will, that it stays enough opaque that it's very general. But the whole idea is that while we cannot see specifically all that the psalmist is suffering with, we also can't see purely what the sources might be. And yet, what is meant for us to understand is that this is how we are to sing which is out of our brokenness. God is not impressed with us nearly singing out of our strength and joy. An expression of joy can be out of the fact, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. In fact, that's oftentimes what the scriptures demonstrate that he rejoices in when we acknowledge that we are at the end of our rope. He is at the end of his rope. And he does something which teaches us it's less something to be studied and more something to be

experienced. Not only is he singing in a minor key of brokenness, he is talking about living in the reality of his own limitations.

You see, one of the reasons I'm so appreciative of this Psalm is that it reminds me again and again to run away from self-dependence because self-dependence in some ways is the ultimate sin. On the one hand, we praise our God. On the other hand, we simply go to work Monday through Friday. We got this. But this Psalm reminds us that even in our best moments, even our most successful events, even when we feel like we've got this, all of that is of the Lord. And he's singing about his limitations. This is uncomfortable for us.

And then he says such phrases like this, "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" Simultaneously, as a thirsty soul in singing out of his own brokenness, acknowledging his limitations, he doesn't know what's going to happen on the other side of today. He doesn't know exactly where God is in the midst of this. He's experiencing what he is expressing as a distance. And in the midst of all of that, he's teaching us something about the God of the covenant. While we as modern-day Christians don't sing like this anymore, he's telling us, this is precisely how I can sing. Why? Because my God is the God of the covenant, He is the Lord. Therefore, He is not bashful about hearing my suffering. And to whom else can I declare these things? He's teaching us about the nature that because God is faithful and because God has already spoken and because God has revealed Himself, because God has given His promises, he can sing like this.

God has already announced to Israel, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Okay, Lord. Then, where are you? And we can ask those kinds of questions of God because our God calls us to call on Him not because He rejoices in our desperation. It's because He wants to remind us that we are always in desperation. Even in our strength, it is all a gift of Him.

And so, he says even my tears taunt me as if saying, where is your God? "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." Now, even as a songwriter, he's now wondering, in this condition, how could he go and lead God's people in praise? And so, he says in verse 5, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" And then this refrain, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

Now, I want to be clear that this is not putting a silver lining around his suffering. What he's saying is, I can sing of both at the same time. I am suffering and feel distant from you. Yet, I know this is not the end of the story. I can't see the end of the story. I don't know how it's going to come about. But because you are a covenant keeping God, because of your promises, because of what you have said, I am crying out to you. And I can say to my own soul, hope in Him. It's not just positive self-talk. It's actually even in saying, hope in God, he's repeating what God has commanded His people to do back to the Lord. He's teaching us what it's like to be both a follower of the Lord and have a thirsty soul. The two can be coexistent.

But then he turns in verses 7-9 and helps us to see that even in the midst of the suffering that the Lord is sovereign. Now, watch what happens in verses 7-9. He says in 7, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." What he says there is – notice what he does with the pronouns – these are your deeps. These are your waterfalls. These are your breakers. These are your waves.

What he's telling us is that the Lord is sovereign in it and over it, meaning even if someone comes to me with a criticism in a harsh way, a mean way, a degrading way, we can embrace the blade of criticism recognizing that even though the person criticizing and meaning to degrade me might mean harm, the Lord might still have truth in it that I can receive. It's not the Lord coming at me, but the Lord is sovereign over the process. So, the Lord is both sovereign over the psalmist's suffering, but He's not the source of it.

But there are a couple of things we need to break down because he does apply these pronouns. But for a second, let me explain in sort of a metaphor that might be helpful, and it's this. I remember the blacktop across from our house in New Jersey where I taught my daughter Caroline how to ride a bike. Now, as a competitive cyclist, I know how to ride a bike. I remember what it was like to be taught to ride a bike. And so, I was teaching her how to ride a bike, and so forth and so on. So, I gave her the steps, I followed behind her. You know where this is going, right? And she would get a little way. And I would run up and I would hold her. And then eventually, I just had to let this happen. I know what's going to happen. I'm allowing it. I'm sovereign over it. I was there when her knees were skinned up and I walked her back home. I was sovereign over it, but I was not the source of her skinned knees. I had to allow that trial so that she could learn how to ride a bike.

Now, here's the caveat. I'm sorry I have to say it these days, but there are those who use that kind of authority to abuse others. That's not what I'm talking about. Where they say, just let them suffer. Or, I'm going to show you. I'll just push you in the pool and teach you how to swim, kid. I'm not talking about that. That is wrong.

But what I'm saying here is the Lord in His love and mercy allows the suffering of the psalmist so that the psalmist can declare you are my rock and my salvation. But the Lord is not the source of the suffering. Now, one might say if you're an astute listener that there are plenty of scriptures where it certainly seems like the Lord brings forth enemies to discipline His people. And yes, that is the case. But notice when that happens it is because God's people refused to repent and rebelled against Him, and the Lord disciplines them. But the Lord disciplines only those He loves.

But pause. Just because we're experiencing suffering, no matter how acute it might be, we can't always conflate it with, well, this is clearly what the Lord is disciplining me for something. Maybe there's some secret sin I haven't confessed. This is why this is happening. But we can't conflate those two. First of all, God is not a hide-and-go seek kind of God with regard to unrepentant sin. We are convicted by the Holy Spirit when we seek to walk in disobedience and refuse to bow the knee. If you are a professing Christian, you know when you are being convicted of sin. But if suffering is happening to you and you've walked in humble reliance with the Lord in union with Him, you don't always have to go straight to, well, this must be because I've done something in disobedience. That's not Christianity. That's not the gospel. That's not what's happening here.

And so, we must be very careful but be able to hold the tension that the Lord is sovereign over our suffering, but not its source. And the psalmist seems to be speaking of that kind of suffering. And he's calling on Him as the sovereign Lord in verse 8, because you have allowed these things to go over me, "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'" And so, again, he's speaking to himself and he's declaring these two things, you are my rock, why have you forgotten me?

There is something for us to learn here. He's not saying it in an accusatory manner. He's inviting God, Lord, help me. Have mercy on me, for you are my rock and my salvation. And we will look at that next week in Psalm 43. But here it is to notice that the reason why his thirsty soul can sing is because he recognized it is the Lord who is sovereign.

But he ends it with a firm foundation. "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?'" And so, even in the midst of this taunting, he comes back to the firm foundation. And what is that firm foundation? The hope is of salvation in the Lord.

So, as we hear this Psalm, this doesn't deserve to be on the dustbin of history, but about full frontal in the life of every Christian. The reason being is because the Lord is the hope of our salvation. And in fact in the heart of blues, there is an empathy coming out of blues music that has an acquaintance with suffering. And so, every Christian as we sing this Psalm, as we read it, as we pray it, as we roll it over in

our minds, we recognize that we sing it as he sang it. He's singing it to a covenant God who knows him. We sing it to the same God who knows suffering. And we have seen the fulfillment of that suffering in Jesus Christ.

While the psalmist did not yet foresee how the Lord would do this, we see as we look back and appropriate this Psalm, it becomes a place where we can begin to say the hope of our salvation is the fact that at the center of our faith is a Savior who was acquainted with our suffering yet without sin, was wrongly accused without sin, suffered and died and bled for us. And then we understand that at the base of this Psalm where it says, "Why are you downcast, 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," we begin to see the empathy of our covenant keeping God. He is not far off from our suffering. He has come close to us in the suffering of Christ. And in His love for us, in His knowledge of us, He has sent the suffering one, as Isaiah would preach and prophecy about as the one who has been with us and love has walked among us. And we can come to the one who has been falsely accused. We can come to one who did not deserve to have any enemies and anyone to chant against Him. We can come to Him with any kind of suffering, any kind of trial, and say Lord, my God, help me.

Here is the key. Yes, you as you read this Psalm can begin to appropriate it and pray it and reflect on it and even use its language as a part of your prayer. But it isn't just meant to be for you, yourself, and Jesus. You see, I'm comfortable with the fact that our covenant keeping God does not blush at our asking Him, O God, where are you? He doesn't get angry by the question. I am comfortable with the fact that He is acquainted with our grief and our suffering. I am comfortable with that. I am comfortable with the fact and free with the fact, as I hope you are, that you can go to the Lord with anything and give it to Him.

But here is something I'm not comfortable with. And that is telling my suffering to other Christians. We get this with me, myself, and Jesus. But how do we do this as a community? Because when I'm asking, O Lord, where are you? I need other Christians who aren't blushing at my asking such a question, who aren't offended by my doubts, who are not offended and close off their ears even to my anger, and dare I say it, even when I have been angry at God.

How are we doing in this regard? I don't know because I'm not in your life. Whether it's in your community group, whether it's with another person, whether it's with people gathering informally or formally, whatever the case is, if we say this is just for you, yourself, and your God, we will miss out on the fact that this was the community of God singing this Psalm together. We should be able to mourn with those who mourn, grieve with those who grieve, weep with those who weep, and not try to rush them to joy, not try to rush them to fixing it, not trying to correct what we might perceive as a wrong attitude. But maybe as God in Christ walked with us, we can walk with others and just listen and pray and say, Lord, have mercy on my brother or sister in Christ and help me to love them and walk with them as you have walked with me.

To the degree that we are experiencing this kind of grace and are able to sing the blues with our God, to the degree that we're able to do that, the greater degree to which we'll be able to do that with each other because this is not just about having a little thing with me, myself, and my prayer closet. That's not the church. This is the church as we sing together, "As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God, my soul thirst for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before my God?" We can sing that together. We can pray that together.

I finish with this. Both a Christian and a sometime preacher, the blues musician Blind Willy Johnson, close to the end of his life, wrote a song, "Dark Was the Night and Cold the Ground." He was singing this as a blues musician in the segregated South. And yet, he would sing of these words.

"Dark was the night and cold the ground on which the Lord was laid. His sweat like drops of blood ran down, in agony he prayed, 'Father, remove this bitter cup if such thy sacred will. If not, content to drink it up, thy pleasure to fulfill.' Go to the garden, sinner. See those precious drops that flow. The

heavy load he bore for thee, for thee he lies so low. Then learn of him, the cross to bear, thy father's will obey. And when temptations press thee near, awake to watch and pray."

We can do that together. Our God can handle it for we sing our blues to a God who loves us and who invites us to bring all of it. Let's go to the Lord.

Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you teach us how to mourn, how to lament. Lord, help us to do that more openly with you and together. Help us to do that as we support and love one another as we walk alongside one another, as we sing to you for you are our hope and our salvation. We know that the end of the story is not suffering, but joy. But today can be a day full of trial and suffering. Hear our prayers, O Lord. Be close to those who are suffering. For those who feel far from you, O Lord, come near. Do not allow their tears to taunt them. Do not allow their enemies to prevail. But you, O Lord, who has had victory over sin and death, may you come as a God of grace and fill this place and fill this people that we might rejoice as we might hurt and as we might sing to you. In Jesus's name. Amen.