

Downcast But Not Cast Down!

Songs for the Summer

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Our Scripture reading this morning is from Psalm 43, which if you're using the church Bible can be found on page 470. I hope you've read ahead, not only 43 but 42 as well. The reason is because in the Hebrew Bible, 42 and 43 are actually one Psalm that go together and I'm sure Dr. Goligher will bring out the riches of the two of them in the sermon but we're going to read, especially focus on 43.

1 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! 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. 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 and my God.

Do keep your Bibles open at those two Psalms that, as Carl has said, belong together and in the Hebrew Bible are one.

Elton John, not often quoted from Tenth pulpits, once had a hit song with this line, "I guess that's why they call it the blues." The blues are sad songs, songs we sing typically when we've been disappointed in love; when hopes evaporate; when we're feeling lonely or afraid. We sing these songs when everything is falling apart and we can't sin them without a catch in our throat and a tear in our eye. The Bible has its own genre of blues music. It was Athanasius, one of the early church fathers, who said, "Most of Scripture speaks to us while the Psalms speak for us." What he was saying is that the songs reflect the moods and the states of God's people. John Calvin likened them to a mirror. When you read the Psalms you sometimes see a reflection of all the emotions that you will feel from time to time in your life. He goes on to say this, "I've been accustomed to calling the book of Psalms an anatomy of all the parts of the soul for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not represented there as in a mirror. Rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities with which the minds of men are want to be agitated."

You see, there is nothing theoretical or abstract about the Bible, especially about the book of Psalms. It takes all of human experience and has something to say to every mood and state of humanity. You will find these Psalm addressing frustration and disappointment and vindictiveness and grief and self-pity and doubt and loneliness and joy and elation and exuberance and trust and hope and depression. All of them captured here. In fact, when you read the book of Psalms you discover that the songs of lament, as they are called, are the largest category within the book because every believer at some point in their life will need to find their own life experience reflected in the pages of Scripture and they will find it most likely here in the book of Psalms.

Now, I imagine it is likely, possibly, that there are people who never feel distant from God; who have never doubted themselves or their faith; who have never been melancholic or depressed; who have never felt vulnerable or threatened and if you're in that category, good luck to you. I have absolutely nothing to say. But sooner or later in life, I reckon you might find yourself needing to revisit this book in order to find words by which you can express to God the feelings and to describe the circumstances that you are going through at that stage in life. I once saw a cartoon that showed a dejected person reporting something that someone had said to him to his friend. "He said to me, 'Cheer up. Things could be worse.' So I cheered up and sure enough, things got worse." Well, I'm hoping that isn't the case today.

So what are we to do then when we are down or depressed or feel challenged? I think the answer here is that we turn to the Savior's songbook. The book of Psalms falls into five books, the five books reflecting the five books of the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Bible. Each book ends with a doxology and an amen as you can see if you just glance back to 41 in the end, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen." End of book one.

Book two begins with this idea, this note of lament and it's written as an instruction. We're told it's written to the choirmaster, A Maskil, which is probably a form of instruction, an instructional Psalm, and it was meant to be sung by the sons of Korah who were kind of the song leaders, a little choirette of leaders who praised the Lord, the God of Israel with a strong voice we're told in 2 Chronicles 20. So it was written to be sung. Written to be sung in public worship. Written to express the emotional life of the people of God.

As you look at this Psalm, there are at least three lessons I think we can learn and the first lesson is this: you are to express your feelings as you talk to God. That is the first thing: express your feelings. Now, immediately half the congregation are going to switch off. You are men. You don't have feelings. You're certainly never down and if you're down, you don't want to talk about it. Expressing feelings is not something you do. Well, you need to get over yourself and learn how to express your feelings and that's part of what the sermon this morning is talking about because through these songs of lament, the Holy Spirit is teaching us, among other things, that expressing our feelings to God is God's will for us and that we can express our feelings to God with brutal honesty when days are

dark and nights are cold, when we find ourselves on the downside of life. Do you notice this Psalmist, for example, does not put a spiritual spin on his experience. He does not feel the need to come up with some kind of spiritual explanation for what is going on. He doesn't kind of come up with a spiritual saying that kind of euphemizes, not euthanizes, it's been a long week of sleepless nights. Not euthanizes but euphemizes away the reality that you are experiencing.

If you look at the language here, the language of being downcast; the language of being disturbed on the inside. This is language our Lord Jesus Christ himself, by the way, uses during the toughest part of his life when he is in Gethsemane and he is anticipating the horror that lies before him, not only the horror of the agony of the cross and rejection by his friends but the horror of God forsakenness. He says, "My heart is disturbed within me. It is troubled within me." In fact, he goes on to say, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," the language coming from verse 7, "Deep calls to deep; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. They have overwhelmed me." Jesus uses this language to describe his own experience. So when we read this Psalm, we are reminding this is not only a Psalm that reflects the experience of believers but it reflects the experience of the ultimate believer, the Lord Jesus himself as he faces crisis in his own life.

So this person begins by expressing their feelings. Now, let me just make a little note here: that opening word, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God," the "deer" there is feminine. This poem may have been written by a woman and therefore we have to keep that in mind as we're going through it. And she or he begins by reflecting on the female deer panting for flowing streams and immediately we're taken to a different place in the world, a different kind of environment radically different from that which I've experienced this last week in the northeast of England because this is a dry environment where there is very little water. Where I was, was a beautiful environment but there was a lot of water. In fact, every day there was a lot of water. Every day and apparently it had been like that for the last three weeks and it helped the attendance. There were over 3,000 in the text listening to me every morning and that was good so I'm grateful that the rain drove them in rather than out onto the hills for walking. But seriously, this Psalm, of course, it's the Middle East, it's a dry environment and the idea is of a little female deer running around searching for a spring of water. Parched. Thirsty and looking for water.

What is this particular person looking for? Well, this particular person is not like so many people today who have felt that the things that they want, the things of which they cannot get enough are stuff. Things. Not just material things we think of but then first and most of us don't have a problem with that, but our problem might be admiration or respect or support or friendship or love or whatever it may be but that's what we want in life. That's what we are after in life. We can't get enough of that in our lives. But if you were to ask this person, "What is it that you want? What is it of which you cannot get enough?" You discover right in the beginning here is a person who cannot get enough of God.

They are thirsty. Well, they tell us that, she tells us that in verse 2, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Here she is, she finds herself thirsty, needy and needing God in her life and she cannot find him. You know, this picture of God being the water of life that sustains us, the fountain of living water as Jeremiah says, the one who gives the river of delights to those who come to him, the one who is the fountain of life and the spring of living water, very often that points us in the Bible to Jesus. In fact, in Isaiah 55, you have that great invitation, "Whoever is thirsty, let him come and drink without money, without paying for it, without a price. It's free to you. It's free to all who come to the Messiah that they might drink and be satisfied."

You see, this person knew that only God could satisfy their spiritual quest and in spite of that, they were thirsty and their desire for God was not materializing. It's a good thing this morning if that is where your soul thirst lies, if that's what you want. If you want more of God. If you're hungering and thirsting after God. Maybe you haven't found that that's what you're wanting. Maybe you're still among those who are looking for intermediate satisfaction rather than ultimate satisfaction. It was Saint Augustine who said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee," referring to God. Maybe you've not arrived at that point and you still find yourself wanting, perhaps wanting stuff and the more you get or the more you look for it, the less you know what it is you really want. You are dissatisfied right to the very core of your being and you haven't discovered yet as this person here has discovered, that actually at the root of all of our lives there is a desire ultimately for God himself.

Look at verse 2, she wants to appear, to meet with God. "When shall I come and appear before God?" What is she missing? She is missing the presence of God with his people. She is missing the worship of God among his worshiping people. That very great sense of the reality of God that comes when God's people are gathered together under the word of God, singing the praises of God, meeting with the people of God, where God has promised he will be most intensely present with his people. Maybe if this is a woman, her village has been attacked by raiders. All the men killed and the women taken away as slaves, perhaps as sex slaves by some tribe. And she finds her way now in terrible circumstances very far from home and she is remembering back to the day when she could gather with God's people in the security of that fellowship and worship God normally and now it's all gone. It's all very distant.

Maybe you have come this morning and your experience for whatever reason it may be, you are missing God. Martin Luther knew what that was like. He often spoke of his experience of a hidden and covered God, even as the sun is sometimes covered with clouds. I got off the plane at JFK yesterday afternoon before driving three hours to get back to Philly. I really want sympathy, by the way. And as I stepped out the plane, do you know what struck me? No? The sun. The sun struck me. I hadn't used my sunglasses all week. You could see the sun shining through a hole in the clouds on a hilltop about several miles away but actually over our heads there was just a blanket of cloud. You couldn't even see the top of the hill sometimes because it was so low. A blanket of cloud and sometimes that's what it feels for the people of God, that there is a blanket of cloud between you and the brightness of the Son of righteousness shining upon your life.

Do you know, one of our great hymn writers is William Cooper. He has written a number of great hymns that we sing and one of the hymns that he wrote begins like this, we used to sing it when I was a little boy in church and it always made me wonder, it starts like this, "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings. It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings." And I used to think, "Why just sometimes?" I was brought, went to school where nobody in my class were Christians. They were very anti-Christian. They used to beat me up when they found out that I was a Christian. Church on Sunday was my refuge. Church on Sunday was the highlight of my life. I loved to be there and I couldn't understand why anyone would just say sometimes until I discovered that William Cooper struggled his whole life with what we would call today a bipolar problem, difficulty, and he was most often in the depths of absolute despair. He had no assurance of his salvation at times and John Newton, his good friend, would come along and encourage him, in fact, took him into his home and cared for him for many, many years. Sometimes a light surprises the Christian. And his close friends who were there when William Cooper died said that as he lay in his deathbed, for the first time just before he died, as it were, his face brightened and he had a look of glad surprise.

Well, this individual, this woman in the Psalm if woman she is, felt far from God and felt fragile in herself. Verses 6 and 7, "Deep calls to deep." Here is this idea of being overwhelmed, a language Jesus uses of his experience when he is facing the cross. She felt this experience. "I am overwhelmed. I am crushed. I am drowning. I feel as if I'm falling, free-falling deeper and deeper and deeper and the water, the waves are going over my head and I need something desperately to hold onto, something to get a foothold on." Overwhelmed. And there are various reasons why you might be overwhelmed in your life, whether it's a sense of guilt or failure, an inability to accept God's forgiveness. It might be overstrain. It might be tiredness. It might be too much studying and learning. It might be the onslaught of criticism or opposition. It might be a temperamental thing where you're susceptible to being negative. It may be a chemical imbalance for which you will need some medical help. But for whatever reason, if you're a believer, do you see, if you are a believer, that is most likely to hit you more sharply than someone who isn't a believer and you will almost invariably take that experience and apply it to your Christian life. That's why this person is weeping day and night. This is why this person is feeling a deep disturbance within themselves. They are cast down. They are in turmoil.

Do you know the Bible has a lot to say about weariness and fatigue as a factor in the way we feel? That we cannot sustain physical, spiritual, emotional intensity for very long without a break or without it breaking us. But for whatever the reason, in times of despair we need to find in God, verse 9, our rock. That is the place we have a foothold, something to push against, to propel us back to the surface so that we can clear the surface again.

She felt fragile. She felt friendless. This is chapter 42:1-2, friendless around others. There were ungodly people. There were deceitful and unjust people. They were putting her down. They were rejecting her. They were attacking her. Or look back to 42:3, "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your

God?" Have you ever been in that position? Something goes wrong in your life and people say, "I thought you were a believer." Or you're down, you're depressed, you're discouraged, maybe you have to take medication and you feel a failure although you shouldn't, by the way, feel a failure. But other people or Satan in your own mind who is the accuser of the brethren smuggles in the idea, "You are a failure. Why are you a Christian experiencing this?" Have you ever been there? Have you ever been there? Has Satan said it in your head if somebody else hasn't said it to you in your ear? "Where is your God?"

My dear friend, you need to learn from this Psalm that when you are struggling that your Lord Jesus has been there too. Your Lord Jesus has experienced this too which is why he quotes this Psalm. Do you remember what they said to him on the cross? "He trusted in God that he would deliver him, let him deliver him if he delight in him. Come down from the cross. Save yourself." My dear friend, if that thought is going through your head, be aware of this: that your God knows and he wants you to express your feelings to him. He wants you to get it out, to cast all your burdens upon him.

In verse 7, the word "your" is the great thing here. He comes to God and he recognizes that nothing can happen apart from God's sovereignty. "You have saved us and have put to shame those who hate us and, God, we have boasted continually. We will give thanks to your name forever." He uses the name of God. Three times the pronoun "you" is used in the Hebrew as he recognizes God is sovereign. What you do is you come to him, you roll it onto him, you express your feelings to him.

Secondly, you examine your foundations. You examine your foundations. So we're to let it out so that we also know when enough is enough. We have to fight these negative thoughts and we need to talk it through so the Psalmist begins to talk it through with us. Having spoken to God, the Psalmist teaches us, we must now speak to ourselves. "Well," you say, "Liam, speaking to yourself is not really, you know, people who come along the road speaking to themselves are worrying. We cross the road to the other side so as to avoid them because we wonder what's going on there." And there are some people that speak to themselves, frankly, who are not all there, but there are other people that speak to themselves because they have discovered that the Bible tells them to. In fact, the sanest thing a Christian can do is to learn to talk to themselves rather than letting themselves talk to themselves.

What do I mean? Well, let me explain what I mean because I think I just said it wrongly. But anyway, I'm going to quote from Martin Lloyd Jones. Listen carefully. "The main trouble with this whole matter of depression," he's using it in a general sense and not a specific sense, "is that we allow ourselves to talk to us instead of talking to ourselves. Have you realized that most of our unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself. Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you. They are bringing back to your mind the problems of yesterday. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Yourself is talking to you."

Now, this man's treatment in the Psalm was this: instead of allowing self to talk, he talks to himself deliberately, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why?" He begins to question his own way of thinking, deliberately challenging his own way of perceiving reality. The Puritan, John Trapp, puts it like this, "The Psalmist chideth the Psalmist out of the dumps." He gives himself a talking to. He says, "Self, listen up. I have something to say to you."

And what does he say? Well, he reminds himself. Look at verse 4 of 42. He reminds himself of something. "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul," he says. "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." He reminds himself of his experience of God in the past, that things were not always the way they are right now. There was a time when he had fellowship with people when they would go to church together; they would sing God's praise together; they would hear the word of God together. They would reflect upon the great redemptive acts of God in the past. Those are objective realities. Those have a place in history. The festivals of Israel, like the festivals of the church, point us back to the objective realities of God at work. In history before us, we have the Lord's table. This Lord's table is a standing reminder to the church, to me, to you as individual Christian people that God has acted in history. God has spoken in history. God has provided a Savior in history. He has done this, the Lord Jesus, took the bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples. The one who gives us the word breaks the bread and it is distributed among us all as God's people and the very symbolism of that at the table, brings home to us the one who gives us the promises, the one who speaks the word to us, the one who has committed himself to us in Christ, gives us this tangible, visible thing to take in our hands, to put before our eyes, to put in our mouths, as the word of God comes ringing in our ears that God's promises are true and that God's word and God's love for us is real. "Self, as you take this bread today, think of it as you take it, the promises of God that were ringing in your ear are for you and they are as real and tangible as that piece of bread you put between your lips." That's what she's remembering.

She's remembering those great processions to the house of God, keeping festival together. "Self, if God be for you, who can be against you?" But not only that, she reminds herself of the grace of God. Look at verse 8, 42:8, "By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." She's referring to the grace of God to him day and night where she contrasts with his day and night weeping and distress in verse 3. So here's the experience: weeping and distress day and night. And what is she doing? She's saying to herself, "Remember however you're feeling day and night, in the midst of all your weeping and wailing and calling out for help day and night, remember day and night while that's going on, the grace of God is also going on. It is still coming to you. It is still supporting you. It is still saving you. It is still encouraging you. It is still keeping you along the path of discipleship. The grace of God has not left you. In the midst of your weeping, the grace of God is still there. It's always there. His steadfast love. He is with me. He is the living God. He is the God of my life. He is God, thy rock. He is the God in whom I take refuge." What he's saying is this: examine your foundations; talk to yourself; remind yourself of who God is.

So express your feelings, examine your foundations and, thirdly, exercise your faith. You see how he does this or she does this. Faith is a resolve. In 42:5 and 11 and 43:5, the same words, "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." Three times: hope in God, hope in God. This is not simply taking up herself by her bootstraps or kind of pulling her collar here and saying or making herself do something that's not real. She is telling herself to do what she needs to do. Hoping means opening your eyes. It means straining them as you look expectantly for God to come and to come in great glory and those who hope in the Lord renew their strength.

What she's saying is, what we must say to ourselves, "You must resolve to focus on the glorious hope that God has put before you in Christ." We say, "Where there's life, there's hope." The Bible says, "Where there is hope, there is life." It is a living hope and we don't talk enough about this living hope. We never talk about the Second Coming. We never talk about heaven or glory. We don't think about the new heavens and the new earth. We don't say enough about that because we are so fixated on the things here. We're more likely to hear talk about cultural relevance within the Christian church today than we are about our eternal glory and the reality is, the more we talk about cultural relevance, the more we recognize how culturally irrelevant we are and the more we see that, the more depressed and discouraged we become and what we really need to be talking about is our heavenly home. It is only the heavenly minded are of any earthly use because then, you see, we're saying to the world there is something bigger and better than you have to offer. There is something that is lasting, permanent. It cannot be shaken by Wall Street falling. It cannot be shaken by war. It cannot be shaken by cancer. It cannot be shaken by death. There are things that cannot be shaken. The kingdom of God cannot be shaken.

Faith has resolved to focus on that. Faith has request. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God." I want you to notice for this person, the relationship with God was the primary thing. That's what they want back so she says she is panting, she is longing, she is thirsty for this relationship with God. In verse 42:2, "My soul thirsts for God." By 42:6 she says, "I remember you," using the second person. By chapter 43, she is saying, "Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause." And you see that lament moves through reflection to petition. She wants God to be her defense attorney. She wants God to be her advocate. She feels she is on trial and not making a way of it so therefore, "Lord, will you step in? Will you act for me? Will you speak for me?" And isn't it good to know, by the way, that we do have an advocate? The very language that is used here that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one, and as long as he is there at the Father's right hand, there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus. But we also have an advocate in our heart, the Holy Spirit, who when all we can do is feel deep within our breast an inarticulate sigh, a groan, a tear of the soul, the Spirit takes that and translates it into a perfect prayer in accordance with the will of God and offers it for us on our behalf to the Father. We have that advocate.

But she has a request. Chapter 43, "Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your blessing, your presence." Who can get me

back into the presence of God? Answer: only God can. And how will he do that? Well, because he has given his revelation, his light and truth. He has given his revelation, his light and truth to Israel and to the church. Together we find them in the Scripture. The truth revealed to Israel and the church is now our inheritance. We have it in our hands and this revealed truth, this revelation from God, is the thing that will ultimately bring us into the presence of God. And what do we find in this revelation? We find that he who is the Word, he who is the Truth, he who is the Light of the World, has come into the world and he has died for us and risen for us so that today he has opened up a way into the innermost presence of God and we may come boldly to God, not just to the door, but right through the door into the living room into the chair beside the fire, right into his presence so that we may speak to him. "O, send thy light forth and thy truth; let them be guides to me; and bring me to thine holy hill, even where they dwellings be." That's the old metrical version of this Psalm.

Well, faith has request and then faith has reliance. "I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." The word for "salvation" there is a bit obscure in the original. There are various shades of meaning. There is an element of the face, the countenance, and the saving or health of the countenance. The word "salvation" can mean "health." It's almost like you look at this person and what do you see? They are downcast. Do you know what that looks like? They look sad. They are mourning. They are grieving. And what she says at the end of this Psalm is this, "I realize that God is the Savior of my countenance. That he is able to change my countenance from being downcast, depressed, discouraged, despairing into joy. God is able to restore the health of my countenance as well as to save me and bring me at last into his presence forever."

I grew up singing the 42nd Psalm, 43rd Psalm, in the old metrical version and this is how it goes,

"O send thy light forth and thy truth;
let them be guides to me,
And bring me to thine holy hill,
ev'n where thy dwellings be.

"Then will I to God's altar go,
to God my chiefest joy:
Yea, God, my God, thy name to praise
my harp I will employ.

"Why art thou then cast down, my soul?
what should discourage thee?
And why with vexing thoughts art though
disquieted in me?

"Still trust in God; for him to praise
good cause I yet shall have:
He of my count'nance is the health,

my God that doth me save."

And what the metrical version captures from this Psalm is that God is both able to restore our happiness temporary though that is in this world, but he is able to bring us to everlasting glory.

So express yourself. Talk to yourself. Then focus on all the things that God has promised to those who love him and take the bread and take the cup and know those promises are real.

Father, we pray that you would please take your word and write it on our hearts to the praise of your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.