

Psalm 42

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[0 : 0 0] reading, which is Psalm 42, continuing in the Psalms, the theme of today, page number 567 in your Bibles. And we'll read the whole of Psalm 42 and Psalm 43. So actually, many scholars think that these two Psalms were originally one. Don't know if that's true or not, but they certainly fit together. So again, it's 567 in your Bibles, Psalm 42.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, where is your God? These things I remember as they pour out my soul, how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One, with shouts of joy and praise among the feast of throng.

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. My soul is downcast within me. Therefore, I will remember you from the land of Jordan, the heights of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs his love. 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 must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, where is your God? Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked.

You are God, my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? Send me your light and your faithful care. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.

[2 : 4 4] I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

Well, we've just been singing about God's faithfulness.

And it's a truth we need to remind ourselves of time and time again, isn't it? That God is for us, that God is faithful. But I wonder if there's ever been periods in your life when you feel distant from God, when you don't feel the nearness of God that you'd like, when you feel, where is God? Where is God in my situation? The psalmist in this psalm we're looking at tonight, he feels this way, and he's thirsting for God. And he gives this analogy of a deer. He says these words, as the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? And I don't know if you've ever felt real thirst.

Can you think of a time when you've been really thirsty? Perhaps in this nation, we don't know thirst like some people do. The most thirsty I've ever been that I can think of is probably on a hot summer's day in the sports field, playing football, and I've forgotten my water bottle. And you know, you're dripping with sweat, and all you want is a drink of water. Everyone else is being selfish with their own. And it's hard to cope when you're thirsty, isn't it? Maybe if you're really hungry, someone says, dinner's in an hour, you can, you know, that's all right, you can deal with that. But thirst is another matter, isn't it? When you're really thirsty, we can't function, can we? Well, the picture here is a deer panting for water. And perhaps it's a deer that's been hunted. Maybe it's gone to the stream and it's dried. Maybe it's in a drought. You know, a deer would keep itself well hydrated, wouldn't it? But here's a deer who needs water, who is dying of thirst.

And the psalmist is saying, he feels like this. Just as the deer is panting for water, needs water, the psalmist needs God. He's thirsty for God, but he's not feeling God's nearness. He feels like God has abandoned him. He feels God is far away. If we look at verse 2, he says, when can I go and meet with God? Or verse 9, it says this, Psalm 42, verse 9, I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning? He feels forgotten by God.

[5 : 46] And verse 3, even the people that are around him are saying this of him, they're seeing his situation and they're saying, where is your God? He says, my tears have been my food day and night. While people say to me all day long, where is your God? So he's being mocked by those around him. He's clearly in distress. We don't know why he's in distress, but he says his tears have been his food day and night.

You know, he's in that situation where anything is making him tearful. I don't know if you've ever been like that. Just maybe stubbing your toe or something and tears come out. He's in that sort of state of mind. He feels abandoned. People are mocking him. They're saying verse 10, it says, my foes taunt me. He's being taunted. He's not around people who are friendly towards his worship of God, but they're mocking him. They're saying, you know, you believe in God. Where's your God now?

You're going through these trials. Where is he? Well, I wonder if you've ever been in a situation like that where you're going through real trials and people are mocking you. People are taunting you. And he doesn't have an answer within himself.

He can't say, God is with me, but actually he feels the same way. He's saying to God, where are you, God? Where are you? He's thirsty for God. And he doesn't only feel the spiritual distance from God, but he's actually physically distant from the Lord's people. It says in verse 4, these things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the mighty one with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throngs.

And then in verse 6, my soul is downcast within me. Therefore, I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. And so where is he? He's way up in the north of Israel, far away from Jerusalem, far away from the temple. We don't know why he's there, but he's longing to be in the temple, in God's presence, worshipping God.

[7 : 59] And so he feels far away from God, spiritually, and he's far away from the temple physically, but he's thirsting for God. He feels like God has abandoned him.

Well, what's the cause of this experience in the psalmist? Well, we don't know. We don't know why he's gone through what his experience is. He doesn't go into detail. But interestingly, there's no confession of sin, is there? He's not saying, as in the psalm this morning, you know, he can't point to a sin in his own life, because when we do sin, we will feel separation from God, won't we? But that isn't always the case. The psalmist here can't point to something in his own life, can't point to a sin that God is punishing him for. But still, he feels distant from God.

So why do we go through these times? Why are there times where we feel God's nearness, we feel his blessing? And why are there other times when we feel God withdrawing from us?

Well, I don't think there's a definitive answer to that, is there? But there are many reasons, not because of our sin, that we may feel distant from God.

One of them we've already mentioned is a lack of fellowship. He's far away from God's people, isn't he? Perhaps you've been in a period in your life where you can't have fellowship. Maybe a period of illness, ill health, you can't make it to church when you'd like to.

[9 : 47] Maybe you've just felt this for a brief moment, maybe you've been on holiday somewhere, and there's no church around. And you feel it, don't you, when you haven't met with God's people, you feel that lack of fellowship. Perhaps for some of you, you don't come to church when you can come to church. And that's something which we need to work on in ourselves, don't we? I.e., do you value the fellowship? Do you value church? What do you think is going on when we come to meet together, to worship God? Is it just something that, you know, it's good to do sometimes? Or is it vital?

In the New Testament, Paul says this, doesn't he? Don't neglect the meeting together, as some of you are doing. But meet together all the more as you see the day coming. You know, as you see troubles around you, and you sense more and more Jesus, Jesus is coming back. As you see the day approaching, we need each other, don't we? We need each other as pilgrims in this world, and we need to encourage one another. I remember just before I went to university, someone gave, there are a load of us around a campfire, and someone gave us this analogy. He took a burning stick out of the fire, you know, on fire, a blazing fire, he took the stick out, and the fire at the end of the stick quickly fizzled out, and all was left was a glowing stick. And he put it back in, and it reignited straight away.

And he gave this analogy, we are like this. Together, we can encourage each other. Together, there's a fire, isn't there? When all these sticks are together, when they're propping each other up, there's fire. But when you take a stick out, if you spread them all about, the fire would completely fizzle out. And we're like that. We probably, sometimes we think, you know, I'm strong enough, I can do this Christian walk by myself. You know, I have my daily quiet times. But actually, we need each other. Because we're like spiritual roller coasters almost, aren't we? We're up and down, we're up and down. But we can pick each other up. And actually, it says in the New Testament, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you. There's something special that happens when believers come together. God meets with us. It's something we need, isn't it, for our own spiritual health. Well, why else might God feel distant? We've said lack of fellowship.

Maybe just a period of ill health, a period of mental health. It's just affecting your disposition. And even though God isn't far away, you don't feel his nearness just because you're emotionally not right within yourself. Sometimes outside troubles, outside circumstances can overwhelm us and we feel distant from God. Perhaps that's what this psalmist partly is going through.

You know, the truth is, there's no perceivable reason sometimes why we feel God's closeness and why we don't. It's interesting, isn't it? Often when people first come to faith, they go through a real period where they just sense God around them all the time. And it's like, God is blessing them. And then it can suddenly happen that they feel God withdrawing. They don't feel God's presence as they did when they first believed. And that can confuse people. I've seen that in a few cases where, you know, people have had this initial enthusiasm and then suddenly they don't feel as close to God as they did when they first believed. Now, is that because they've sinned? Is that because they've withdrawn from God? Well, that's not necessarily the case. There are periods where God feels near and there are periods perhaps when he doesn't feel so near. And we can't always put a finger on what that reason is.

[14 : 00] Why might God withdraw his presence? I don't want to be too emphatic on this. But God tests us, does need to strengthen us. We're to live by faith, not by sight.

Perhaps he wants us not to rest so much on our emotional state, but on truth, on the truth of God's word. If we're always just resting on how we feel inside, that's not going to bring us all the way, is it?

We've got to rely on God's truth, on his word. We need to get that truth inside of us. Perhaps sometimes it's to spur us on to seek him more.

You know, if we always know God's blessing, but we don't put our effort in to seek him, God wants us to thirst for him, doesn't he? He wants us to seek him. We should all, as Christians, want more of God. The truth is God doesn't reveal to us all the ways and all the reasons he works in our lives. But we know we can trust him and he has always, has a plan. He always does all that he does for a reason, for a purpose. So this sadness, this feeling of distance, it doesn't mean that you have to condemn yourself. It doesn't mean that you're necessarily sinful.

This psalmist, from the psalm, we wouldn't get the impression that he's sinful. He's thirsting for God. He wants more of God, but he's going through a tough time. So what can we learn from the psalmist?

[15 : 34] What do we do in these periods of distress, of these periods where God feels distant? Well, the first question I want to ask you is this. Are you thirsty? Are you thirsty for God?

Do you really want more of God? Or are you satisfied with where you are? Are you satisfied in, you know, having a nice life, going on as you are, you know, having enough of God to keep me going?

But do you want more of God? Actually, to thirst for God is a healthy sign, isn't it? Matthew 5 verse 6 says this, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

What about this in 1 Peter? Crave the pure spiritual milk, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. So just as a baby, as a newborn baby, craves milk, we as believers are to always be craving spiritual milk. And we're to be craving fellowship, we're to be craving time with God, we're to be craving teaching, we're to be craving God. We need it as believers. And so it's, just as it's healthy for a baby to thirst for milk, to want food, we'd be worried if it didn't want milk, wouldn't we?

If a believer isn't craving more of God, isn't thirsty for God, it's not a healthy sign, is it? Because the truth is, God is the only one who will satisfy our inner desires. You know, everyone is looking for satisfaction, aren't they? Some people seek it in all kinds of things, in, you know, pleasures, maybe, I don't know what your pleasure is, maybe it's sports, or family, or friends, all these things which are good, but they won't satisfy us, will they? Because we were made for God. There's a famous quote by Saint Augustine, and he says this, I'll just read it.

[17 : 35] You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you. And so we as human beings, we were made for God, weren't we? And until we come to him, we will be restless. We find our rest in God. Jeremiah 2.13, God says this to his people.

My people have committed two sins. They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and they have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

Whatever we're looking for to satisfy our inner longings, our inner desires, it's a broken cistern if it's not God, isn't it? God is the only one who will satisfy. So we need to be thirsting for God. We need to say with the psalmist, as the deer pants for streams of water, my soul thirsts for you. Even if we are in a period of blessing where we feel God's presence, we want more of God, don't we? We're to seek him.

So what else can we learn from the psalmist? Well, I want to go through three things. What does the psalmist do in his state? What does he do with his pain?

These three things. He pours out his soul to God. He reminds himself of times when he has felt God's blessing. And finally, he preaches to himself. So I'm going to go through these three things.

[19 : 03] So the first thing, pour out your soul. Be honest before God. It says this in verse four, These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the mighty one.

So whatever we're feeling, even if we're, you know, feeling perhaps unholy, almost feelings towards God, feelings which aren't right, we have to be honest before God, not disrespectful, but we can be honest before him. He sees our hearts anyway, doesn't he?

And actually the psalm set an amazing precedent for being completely honest with God, don't they? There's a whole range of emotions within the psalms. There's joy, elation, there's anxiety, there's pain, you know, there's deep despair, there's anger, there's depression. Every emotion you can think of you'll find in the psalms. And the psalms were the prayer book of Israel.

And so in a sense we're to learn to pray from the psalms. We're to be honest before God. He wants us to be honest with him. So where the temptation, when we feel distant from God, can be to separate ourselves from God for a time, you know, to, we want to write, get ourselves right in ourselves before we come to God.

Actually, the first step is to include God in the conversation. Include God in your pain. Whatever you're going through, we need to pour out our pain before God. The psalmist does this, does this well, doesn't he? You know, why my soul are you downcast? Put your hope in God.

[20 : 49] My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. My tears have been my food day and night. When people say to me all day long, where is your God? He lifts all of his pain, all that he's going through, to God. He's completely honest to God. And if the psalmist did this in the Old Testament, how much more encouragement do we have with, you know, the revelation in the New Testament, the revelation of Jesus to come before God with our pain? You see, we have a high priest, the great high priest in the heavens, Jesus Christ, the one who was completely man, who is completely man, who suffered in every way as we did, who is tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.

He says, therefore, we're to find encouragement and boldness to come before him, to come before the throne of grace and to find help in our time of need. And so just by the fact that Jesus has been through what we've been through, he invites us to be honest with him, to be honest before God, because he cares for us, because he can, in one sense, he can relate to us. He's suffered in every way, worse than we will ever suffer. He's been tempted in every way. 1 Peter 5 verse 7 says this, cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. And so we're invited, aren't we? Whatever our anxieties are, whatever our pain is, cast it on God. He cares for us. He's not a distant God.

He wants to know what we're going through. So we're invited to come before God, to pour out our pain before him. So what's the second thing? The first thing is pour out your soul.

The second thing, remind yourself of times when you felt God's nearness. Remind yourself of times of God's blessing. And I think sometimes we can almost have spiritual amnesia. We're like goldfish.

You know, we've got a three-second memory. And there's so many times in the past when God has blessed us. God has brought us through trials. But we're so quick to forget his faithfulness, aren't we? We're almost so involved in however we're feeling in our emotions in that moment, that we forget God's blessing. We forget his faithfulness. We forget the promises in his word.

[23 : 08] Where has God brought you from in life? How were you saved? How has he blessed you? How has he led you through trials in the past? Think of these things. What does the psalmist say in verse 4?

These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the mighty one with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

And so he's remembering times of joy, times when he's been with other believers in the festivals, in the temple worship, and he's felt utter joy. He's felt God's presence. And then he continues verse 5. Why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.

And so as he reminds himself of God's blessings to him in the past, of God's faithfulness, he then carries on and says, put your hope in God. Why are you downcast? Remember, remember these times of blessing. They will come again. For yet, I will yet praise him, my saviour and my God, he says in verse 5. If he's blessed us in the past, if he's led us in the past, we can trust him to lead us in the future, can't we? He's faithful. He's promised.

And actually, it's interesting, isn't it? Just the real mixture of emotions in the Psalms. And it's like, from verse to verse, you go from complete elation to complete depression, to complete elation to complete depression. We've seen that in verse 4 and 5. Verse 8 and 9, another example of this.

[24 : 44] You know, it's this real sense of God's nearness. He says this, And then verse 9, So in one sentence, he's saying, God is with me. He's with me in the day. He's with me in the night.

I sing to him in the night. He's the God of my life. And then the next verse, he's saying, God, you've abandoned me. Where are you? And it's a real picture of ourselves, isn't it? We're up and down.

We're up and down. But he's not afraid to express how he's feeling. And of course, he's aware that God is faithful. He's aware of God's sovereignty. He knows that, he knows that, he knows the truth.

He knows that God won't abandon him. But what is he doing? He's not necessarily saying what he knows deep down, but he's saying how he feels. He feels like God is distant. He feels like God is far away from him. But he knows that God is with him. One of the interesting verses to me is verse 7. He says this, All your waves and breakers have swept over me. And so in a sense, he's got a real picture of the sovereignty of God, doesn't he? In a sense, he's saying all these trials that I'm going through, in one sense, they're your waves, they're your breakers, they swept over me. Nothing in this life that overtakes me, no pain that I'm going through, nothing that I go through, can I go through unless you allow it. He says, God, you're in complete control. You know, people are oppressing me, but he says your waves have enveloped me. So actually, he knows the truth deep down, doesn't he?

But in these times of despair, and perhaps when others are going through despair, we can say things which aren't doctrinally correct, can't we? But we need to, in a sense, we need to encourage each other, we need to give each other a pass, in a sense. Because, you know, later on, they'll look back, and they'll see, you know, God was faithful in these times. But in the midst of our pain, we can say, we can say things which aren't quite right, aren't quite reverent. And we do need to check ourselves, we do need to be reverent before God. But God, at the same time, he understands our pain, doesn't he? He understands us. He understands what we're going through. So we can be honest before God. The final thing, I've said, pour out your soul before God. I've said, number two, remind yourselves of God's faithfulness in the past. Number three, preach to yourself. Preach to yourself the truth. And the example of this in the psalm is this repeated phrase in verse 5, in verse 11, and in verse 5 of the next chapter, why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

[28 : 09] Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my saviour and my God. So he's not speaking to God, he's speaking to his own soul. He's saying, why are you disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.

I will yet praise him. God is faithful. And you know, if we don't do this, we've always got an inner monologue in our head, don't we? We've always got chatter in our head. And usually it's negative.

Often it's negative, isn't it? Perhaps that depends on our personality. But especially when we're going through pain, when we're going through hard times, we just, you know, listen to the chatter in our head. It's going to be false, isn't it? And it's going to bring us away from God. So the advice is this, don't listen to yourself. Don't listen to yourself, but talk to yourself. Don't listen to your own emotions. Don't let how you're feeling, your emotions, delegate the truth that you believe, but let the truth of God affect your emotions. Don't listen to yourself, talk to yourself, preach to yourself. Remind yourself of God's promises in these times of pain. Like the psalmist, get hold of yourself and say, my soul, why are you downcast? Why are you disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. I will yet praise him, my savior and my God. You know, you can do this like the psalmist did, literally speaking to yourself. You can do this through prayer. You can do this by reading the word, but however you do it, you've got to get truth into yourself, don't you? You've got to hold on to truth. And if the psalmist had reasons to trust in God's faithfulness, that he would see God again, how much more do we, with the promises again of the New Testament, have truth to encourage ourselves with? What might we say to ourselves in times of trial? Well, Ephesians 1 verse 3, there's many verses you could go to, aren't there? But this is maybe one you could go to.

Praise be to the God and Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Then he goes on, you know, we're predestined, we're elected, we're adopted. We've been given every blessing in the heavenly realms, every blessing.

You know, if we just believe this, if we just held on to the truth that we have, we would quickly, you know, we'd turn away from our pain and we'd be joyful, wouldn't we? We have so much to be joyful for. We have so much truth to hold on to, but we need to hold on to it.

[30 : 51] We need to speak it into ourselves. The truth is, Jesus died on the cross. Jesus said, I thirst so that we would never thirst. And Jesus experienced separation from God, separation from the Father in our place, so that we never truly would be separate from God. We never are separate from God. We never have to be separate from God. God is with us. Jesus says, I will never leave you or forsake you. So we need to hold on to the truth that God is with us. God is for us. Hold on to the promises of God. Preach to yourself. So at the end of this passage, are all the psalmist problems dealt with? You know, have his problems gone away? Well, actually, no.

Whether you think the ending is the end of 42 or 43, he ends in the same way. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. So he ends saying to his soul, you know, I'm still downcast. I still have these problems. But he ends in a more hopeful place, doesn't he? He ends trusting in God. And actually, the pattern of many of the psalms is one of beginning with despair and ending interesting in God. And it's not that his problems have gone away. But he's turned away from himself to God. His focus is on God.

So we don't have a remedy for all our troubles here. And it's not wrong to be sorrowful. But there's a right way to be sorrowful. We need to include God in our sorrows. And in a sense, use our sorrows to press into God, to seek God. In the midst of our sorrows, we need to seek God, don't we? We need to seek him with our whole being. And God will meet us in our sorrow.

Well, I'll just finish in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a faithful God. You're a God who loves us. You're a God who's blessed us with every blessing in the spiritual, in the heavenly realms. You've forgiven us. You've adopted us. These are all truths we know in our heads. But at the same time, Father, we're pilgrims in a world which doesn't know you. We live in the midst of a fallen world, in the midst of pain, in the midst of sorrows, in the midst of troubles. We know that one day those sorrows will cease. You will wipe every tear from our eyes. And we will be with you in fullness forever.

But we all go through sorrows day by day, Father. But we pray in the midst of these that we will remember you. We will pour out our souls to you. And that we will press into you, Father. Help us to sorrow well, Father. Not to turn away from you in our sorrows, but to come to you in our sorrows. And we thank you that we will find help in our time of need. That you're faithful, that you love us, Father.

[34 : 35] Help us to believe these things. And again, enlarge our hearts that we would understand these things and preach to ourselves the truth and trust you, Father. Help us to lay hold of the truth in your word, we pray. Amen.