**Psalm 42 & 43**

When we started our study, we mentioned that the book of Psalms is the book of human emotions. No matter what mood you may be in, you’ll find a psalm to give expression to that mood. The Psalms contains exalting, exhilarating expressions of life’s highs and joys. The Psalms also expresses the need of a soul that has descended into the valley of shadows.

All the **psalms are designed to teach us how to worship God**, how to **have fellowship with God**, how to **experience the fullness and richness of God**. They teach us how to honestly offer up to God the full range of our emotions. **If you have a problem, don’t hide it from God or from yourself. Tell Him about it**. Don’t put on a pious act and try to smooth it over. **If you are angry with God, say so. If you are upset about something that He has done, tell Him so**. If you are resentful, bring it out in the open and resolve it. If you are happy and glad, express your joy and praise to Him. **That is what worship is all about—the honest expression of your heart to God**.

*The psalms are designed to meet our needs immediately.* It works instantly. God gives us precise assurance when we read His Word. When we’re **feeling low, the psalms lift us** up. When we’re **lonely and confused, they comfort us**. When we’re **afraid, they embrace us and pacify us.** When we’re **discouraged, they encourage us**. The psalms will **provide assistance—whatever your most pressing need may be.**

The psalms we are going to discuss this morning have to do with spiritual depression.

Almost 50 years ago D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, published a book entitled *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure,* which became the most highly valued and widely circulated book he ever wrote. The only conceivable reason it has been so popular is not that the subject itself is attractive, but that so many people, including Christians, are depressed and looking for solutions.

All of us have been depressed at times. We get down in the dumps. We sing the blues. We feel that God has forgotten us and that we will never be able to get on track with God again. It is a condition that old mystics accurately labeled “*the dark night of the soul.”* As someone once said—either you have been there, are currently in that condition, or will be in the future.

It is a puzzling condition too. We wonder why it is happening, especially if we are Christians. We identify with Erma Bombeck, who asks in the title of one of her best-selling books, *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I Living in the Pits?*

The psalms we will look at today, Psalms 42 & 43, which opens book two of the Psalms, are about depression, and I suppose the facts that made Lloyd-Jones’ book so popular many years ago are the same facts that have made these two psalms among the best loved and most frequently consulted of the psalms. In many Hebrew manuscripts Psalms 42 and 43 constitute one psalm. **Read Psalms 42 & 43.**

**Psalm 42**

**For the director of music. A *maskil* of the Sons of Korah.**

**1**As the deer pants for streams of water,  
    so my soul pants for you, O God.  
**2**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
    When can I go and meet with God?  
**3**My tears have been my food  
    day and night,  
while men say to me all day long,  
    “Where is your God?”  
**4**These things I remember  
    as I pour out my soul:  
how I used to go with the multitude,  
    leading the procession to the house of God,  
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving  
    among the festive throng.

**5**Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
    Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
    for I will yet praise him,  
    my Savior and **6**my God.

My soul is downcast within me;  
    therefore I will remember you  
from the land of the Jordan,  
    the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.  
**7**Deep calls to deep  
    in the roar of your waterfalls;  
all your waves and breakers  
    have swept over me.

**8**By day the Lord directs his love,  
    at night his song is with me—  
    a prayer to the God of my life.

**9**I say to God my Rock,  
    “Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I go about mourning,  
    oppressed by the enemy?”  
**10**My bones suffer mortal agony  
    as my foes taunt me,  
saying to me all day long,  
    “Where is your God?”

**11**Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
    Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
    for I will yet praise him,  
    my Savior and my God.

### Psalm 43

**1**Vindicate me, O God,  
    and plead my cause against an ungodly nation;  
    rescue me from deceitful and wicked men.  
**2**You are God my stronghold.  
    Why have you rejected me?  
Why must I go about mourning,  
    oppressed by the enemy?  
**3**Send forth your light and your truth,  
    let them guide me;  
let them bring me to your holy mountain,  
    to the place where you dwell.  
**4**Then will I go to the altar of God,  
    to God, my joy and my delight.  
I will praise you with the harp,  
    O God, my God.

**5**Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
    Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
    for I will yet praise him,  
    my Savior and my God.

Since most of us are downcast at some time or another, we turn naturally to a psalm that asks honestly and forthrightly, “*Why are you downcast, O my soul?*” (42:5). And we are encouraged when it answers hopefully, “*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God”* (42:11; 43:5).

“*I will yet praise him!”*  The words mean that my present downcast mood is not the final act of my life’s drama.

If you recall, the Psalms consists of 150 chapters and are divided into five books. In the first book of the Psalms, which include Psalms 1-41, almost all of these psalms are ascribed to David. Actually 37 of the 41 are by David. The first two are introductory, and two others have no opening ascription. David is the only author identified in the first book. In the second book (Psalms 42-72), 18 are ascribed to David. But in addition, one is assigned to Asaph, another to Solomon, and eight to the Sons of Korah. Three have no names with them.

The inscription of this psalm is “*Maschil (Mas’kil), for the sons of Korah.”* Although the exact meaning of *Maschil* is uncertain, many Bible scholars indicate that it means it is a psalm of teaching, a psalm of understanding, or contain instruction in godliness.

The Korahites were Levites, descended through Kohath, Korah’s father (I Chron. 6:22-48; 9:17-32; II Chron. 20:19). They were employed in the performance of the temple music. But the interesting thing is this: when the Israelites were wandering in the desert, Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses and perished by God’s judgment along with the other leaders and their families (Num. 16; Jude 11). For some reason the Sons of Korah were spared, and it seems from their later employment that, in gratitude to God and his mercy, they must have dedicated themselves to producing and performing the music used to praise god at the wilderness tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem (Num. 26:11). This interesting fact is a reminder that there can be devout children of reprobate fathers as well as devout fathers with reprobate children, and that no one needs to be kept from serving God because of his or her parents’/sons’ sins.

The chief reason for taking these two psalms together is that both deal with spiritual depression. They give us at least six reasons for it, and they also indicate the cure.

John Stott commented on these two psalms and said, *what is particularly moving is that the psalmist does not acquiesce in his condition, but three times, in words which form a refrain, he questions himself about his despondency and summons himself to trust in God* (42:6,7,14,15 and 43:5-6).

What are the causes of spiritual depression? There are undoubtedly more than these psalms list, but the place to begin is with the causes they identify.

1. *Forced absence from the temple of God, where God was worshiped* (42:1-2). We do not know from the title of this psalm the particular person who composed it. He is presumably just one of the Sons of Korah. But whoever he was, we know the chief thing that was bothering him. He was far from Jerusalem and its temple worship on Mount Zion, and he therefore felt himself to be cut off from God. The psalm begins with his panting after God “*as the deer pants for streams of water”* when he cannot find it.

We do not know exactly where this unknown author was, either, or why he was there, but we can come close to answering the first question at least. He says he is writing “*from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar”* (42:6). Mizar means, “little hill” (or “little mountain”). We know of no hill by that name, but “*the land of the Jordan*” is the region beyond the Jordan to the north and east, where Mount Hermon is. So Mizar was probably a lesser mountain in the Hermon range. This area is pretty far from Jerusalem, and some writers have suggested that if a traveler (or captive, which the author could be) were headed east in the direction of Babylon, this is the last point from which he might glimpse the familiar mountains of his homeland to the south.

It may mean be that the “*ungodly*” nation referred to in 43:1 was the A’rameans of Damascus and the A’rameans had taken the author captive during one of their incursions into Judah, such as that of Hazael (Haz’a-el) recorded in II Kings 12. This attack in II Kings affected especially the area in which the Khorahites had been assigned cities (Jos. 21:4, 9-19).

So, the psalmist is far from home and feels that he is therefore also far from God. It is not that he does not believe that God is everywhere, or that God is not with him. He is praying to God in these psalms, after all. But his being away from home has gotten him down, and his depressed state has caused him to feel that God is absent.

There is another dimension to this sense of alienation. We need to remember that the employment of the sons of Korah was at the temple in the performance of the temple music. So, the author’s forced absence from Jerusalem was also an absence from his work and therefore from his sense of being useful. It reflected on his whole purpose for living. Perhaps you have felt the force of that in one way or another. I am sure you have if you have ever lost a job or perhaps are stuck in a dead-end job. An early forced retirement will lead to depression like this for some people. So will old age, when a person feels that his or her useful days are done. And, of course, so will forced isolation and associated separation from loved ones that we are undergoing now during this pandemic—and the uncertainty of when it will end.

2. The **second cause of spiritual depression** is: *The taunts of unbelievers* (42:3,10). In this distant land the psalmist was also surrounded by unbelievers who taunted him with the biting challenge, “*Where is your God?*” This must have hurt him a lot, because he repeats the line twice in just this one composition. In ancient times almost no one was a true atheist. The first real atheism came with Greek philosophy. So, the taunt did not mean that God did not exist but that God had abandoned the psalmist. It meant, “*Where is your God when you need him? Where is your God now?*”

This is the cause for deep depression. Where is God indeed? Where is God when I am in a far country, separated from my usual work, and taunted by enemies? Why doesn’t God seem to hear my cries? Why doesn’t he intervene to change my circumstances?

3. The **third cause of spiritual depression** is: *Memories of better days* (42:4). He is troubled by memories of better days. There is a proper use of memory in times when we are depressed, remembering God’s past acts as an encouragement to believe that he will act for us again. But that is not the first use of memory we find in these psalms. What we find here is the writer’s wistful remembrance of the good days when he “*used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng* (42:4)*.*

It is hard for us to feel the extent of this longing for the exuberant joy of Jewish worship by an ancient Israelite, but C.S. Lewis captures a bit of it in a chapter called “*The Fair Beauty of the Lord*” in *Reflections on the Psalms.* He calls it an “*appetite for God”* and argues that it had “*all the cheerful spontaneity of a natural, even a physical, desire. It is gay and jolly. They are glad and rejoice (Ps. 9:2) . . . Let’s have a song, bring the tambourine, bring the ‘merry harp with the lute,’ we’re going to sing merrily and make a cheerful noise (Ps. 81:1-2). Noise, you might well say. Mere music is not enough. Let everyone, even the benighted gentiles, clap their hands . . . Let us have clashing cymbals, not only well tuned, but loud, and dances too (Ps. 150:1-5). Let even the remote islands (all islands were remote, for the Jews were no sailors) share the exultation (Ps. 97:1).*

Our services do not have the same enthusiasm or liveliness as the temple religion, and there are some good reasons for that. Nevertheless, for many Christians some of their very best memories are of worshiping with other believers in church, perhaps at a special holiday season—Christmas or Easter, for example. The absence of these times as well as their remembrance can contribute to depression.

4. The **fourth cause of spiritual depression** is: *The overwhelming trials of life* (42:7), referring to them as “*waves and breakers”* that have swept over him. We do not know what these trials were, though we can imagine that they were the adverse circumstances that had borne him away from Jerusalem. Perhaps he is seated by a mountain stream, watching the tumbling waterfalls and currents. Under other circumstances this might be a delightful experience, one likely to draw out thanks to God for creating such beauty. As it is, he sees the waves as torrents of evil fortune that have broken on his head.

5. The **fifth cause of spiritual depression** is: *Failure of God to act quickly on our behalf* (42:9). Verse 9 is a painful cry to God for having forgotten him. It reminds us of nothing so forcefully as Jesus’ cry from the cross, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mt. 27:46), though the words of Jesus were actually borrowed from Psalm 22:1. It is not unusual for a depressed person to feel forsaken by God.

6. The **sixth cause of spiritual depression** is: *Attacks from ungodly, deceitful, and wicked persons* (43:1). These are probably the same people who taunted the psalmist earlier, asking, “*Where is your God?*” But in this section, we learn that they had also been attacking him unjustly, since he prays for vindication and a pleading of his cause by God. Most of us can relate to this too, since it is not unusual for those who try to live for God to be unjustly accused, attacked, and slandered. Jesus said, “*You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also”* (Jn. 15:19-20). It is an unusual person who will not be occasionally depressed by malicious and hurtful treatment.

And what about those many additional causes of depression that the poet does not even mention? We could add the ones listed in *Spiritual Depression* by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *temperament (*some people are just more inclined to depression than others), *physical health* (we can be affected by adverse physical health), *a down reaction after a great blessing* (an example is Elijah after his great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel), *the attacks of Satan* (one of his strategies is to get us to take our eyes off God), and *simple unbelief* (probably the most significant of all.

Maybe you have some things of your own to add: a great disappointment in life, some personal failure, the burden of getting old, and challenges your children or grandchildren are currently experiencing. The list is probably endless.

But we have looked at the causes of depression enough. What is the cure for spiritual depression?

As we all know too well, the world turns to many false cures. Some people try to escape the depressing realities of their lives through divorce, excessive entertainment, or frequent vacations. Some pop pills. Some are on habit-forming drugs. There must be millions who echo the thoughts of the young character on a television series years ago who proclaimed, “*When I get depressed, I go shopping.*” They buy a new dress or a car. These “*cures*” are ineffective. At best they merely lift our spirits for a time.

It is different when we study what the author is teaching us in this important two-part psalm. The psalm tells us how the godly person can win out over depression.

1. *He takes himself in hand.* The most important thing to be said about the approach to depression taken by the author of this psalm is that he does not give in to depression or self-pity but rather takes himself in hand and wrestles through it. He reminds himself of what he really knows and finds that “*no reasons for being cast down are so strong as those for elation and calm hope.*”

Lloyd-Jones makes a great deal of this point, stressing that talking to ourselves rather than allowing circumstances to talk to us is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. It is a case of the mind speaking to the emotions rather than the emotions dictating to the mind:” You *have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: “Why art thou cast down”—what business have you to be anxious?* You must turn on yourself, reprimand yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: “*Hope thou in God—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way.”*

2. The second way to win out over spiritual depression is that *he challenges himself to do what should be done.* The second step in the battle against depression follows from the act of addressing oneself in this manner. Indeed, it is part of it. It is to challenge oneself to do what the spiritual self knows should be done: “*Put your hope in God*” (42:11 & 43:5). There can be no lasting hope in anything else in this sinful, failing world. There never has been and there never will be. Besides, the believer has put his or her trust in God in past days. He can do so again. It is a mark of simple sanity to do what the psalmist urges should be done.

3. The **third step** is that *He reminds himself of a great certainty.* To “*hope in God*” leads to the final step in the crusade against depression, the reminder, based on the character of God we trust, that “*I will yet praise him.*” This is a great certainty. God has not changed. The writer of Hebrews reminds us: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever*” (Heb. 13:18)*.* Therefore, his purposes for me have not changed. He has led me to uplifting victories in times past. He will do so again. Therefore, instead of looking at the past pessimistically as something I have lost, I will look to it as a foretaste of the many good things yet to come. We can find multiple examples of this in the lives of the Bible’s characters, people like Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David. Remember Joseph’s comments to his brothers, recorded in Genesis 50. The setting is that Jacob has died and the brother who had sold Joseph in slavery were afraid that now that their father was dead, Joseph would extract his vengeance. In Genesis 50:19-20 Joseph said: “*Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”*

Does medicine such as the psalmist prescribes really help? Does it result in a cure? The progress achieved by it is evident throughout the psalm.

Look how the thought flows and the mood rises throughout this two-part composition. In the first stanza (42:1-4) the psalmist remembers the former days at the temple and is oppressed by the memory; in stanza two he draws on memory again, but this time it is to remember God and his goodness. In the first stanza he is troubled by the taunts of enemies who say to him, “*Where is your God?*” In the second stanza he answers that God is with him (v.8). In verse one, God is absent. In verse 9, God is his “*Rock*.” By the time we come to Psalm 43:2, God is his “*stronghold,”* and he is praying confidently that God will guide him back to the place of worship and the joys of former days. The first two stanzas were laments; the third has become a strong, believing prayer.

In our study of Ezekiel a few years ago we looked at God’s promise for the future of Israel while they were still captives in Babylon. In Ezekiel 36 Ezekiel is told by God to prophecy to the children of Israel and let them know that their prayers will be answered, and their long-expected Messiah will return. At that time Ezekiel’s prophecy will be fulfilled: “26*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. 28You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God”* (Ezek. 36:26-28).

That same Scripture also touched the heart of Mary Kay Beard, a notorious safecracker and bank robber. She and her husband were hardened criminals. Finally, she was arrested and locked up in an Alabama jail. There, she found a Bible, placed by Gideons, and shoved it under her mattress. One day, Mary Kay took out that Bible and began reading. She was drawn to a verse in Ezekiel, chapter 36, “*a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh* . . .” Desperate and broken, Mary slid down from the metal bunk and onto the cold, cement floor. Kneeling she prayed, “*Lord help me. I’ve made such a mess of everything. If Your promise is true, and if You love me as John 3:16 says, then take my life and make it whatever You want it to be*.” Mary’s experience behind bars helped her understand the loneliness of those in confinement. After she was released from prison, she founded the Angel Tree ministry to help prisoners and their families draw closer together by drawing them to Jesus. For more than 25 years, she served in this ministry, reaching the lost by showing God’s love. Mary was called home to be with the Lord four years ago (2016). God’s word was put in Mary’s cell, and as the Lord said in Isaiah 55:11, *my word shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*

Chuck Swindoll also comments on these verses in Ezekiel and says, “*Because the Holy Spirit is real and relevant, we are able to feel Him giving us power and perseverance. When He does that, He fills us. Ask the Spirit of God to fill you.”*

Is there a cure for depression? Yes, but it is neither in us nor in the world. It is in God. The cure is to seek God’s face, so we will not be downcast, which is what the psalmist does.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father,* *please grant us peace of mind and calm our troubled hearts. At times our souls are caught in what feels like a turbulent sea. We can’t seem to find our balance, and we constantly stumble and worry and have lost all sense of direction. Give us the strength and clarity of mind to find our purpose and walk the path You’ve laid out for us. We know that You are the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, and we put our trust in Your loving hands, knowing that You will comfort us so that we can also comfort others with the comfort you have given us during this time of stress. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen!*