

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
July 31, 2022

Praying the Psalms
“When I Am Despondent”

Psalm 42-43 (NIV)

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, my 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 people 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 to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

5 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.

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. 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, 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.

1 Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. 2 You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? 3 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. 4 Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

5 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.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We're continuing our series, "*Praying the Psalms.*" We're learning how to pray using Scripture as a guide for how we pray, and also as a means for spiritual formation, so that the Word not only shapes our praying but shapes us as people as well.

The title for today's message may seem overly dramatic: "When I Am Despondent." But I suspect that most of us, if not all of us, have had more than one trip down the road of discouragement and spent more time than we'd like to admit in the neighborhood of the dumps. So we're in familiar territory.

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

If you haven't already done so, I'd like to invite you to open your Bible or your Bible app or the Bible in the pew rack in front of you and turn to the reading we just heard from Psalms 42-43. Unlike the previous weeks, where we focused on a single psalm, today's reading includes two psalms—for a very simple, but significant, reason which I discovered years ago while I was reading through the Psalms. And it was no small comfort to me when I subsequently was able to confirm my hypothesis by consulting some scholarly commentaries.

You see, what I discovered in my reading is that although our English Bibles uniformly divide Psalms 42 and 43 into separate psalms, they appear to have been originally written as a single psalm. And that is the opinion of most biblical scholars today. Why? What would indicate such a conclusion?

First, the most obvious clue is the repetition of the refrain that is found in 42:5, 11; and 43:5. Second, when you read the two psalms as a single psalm, paying attention to the repeated refrain, you have a much clearer sense of the structure of the prayer and thus of its meaning. When read as a single prayer, we see a coherent movement in the text from the remembrance of former joys through current troubles followed by a specific hope of future restoration that is connected to the former joys. Quite simply, the text makes more sense when read in this way. Third, many of the Hebrew manuscripts that underlay our translations actually present these as a single psalm. And finally, Psalm 43 has no superscription, which is unusual in this section of the Psalter (chapters 42-72), suggesting that it was not originally a separate composition.

[Slide 3] *Author and provenance*

According to the superscription that introduces this psalm, the composer was one of the Levitical singers, the “sons of Korah,” and the psalm was dedicated to (or composed for) the director of music. Both of these indicators point to a time after King David appointed musicians from the Levitical families to serve as singers and instrumentalists for the worship of God in the Tabernacle and later, in the Temple in Jerusalem.

We can’t pinpoint when it was written beyond that; nor can we say for certain what the situation was when it was composed. From the language of the psalm, it appears that the psalmist’s troubles are related to one of two possibilities: He is lamenting the fact that he can no longer go to the Temple to serve and worship, either because (a) he has been taken from the land into exile (which would place this some time after the late 7th century BC (610-586 BC)); or (b) he has become ill or seriously injured or has somehow become unable to fulfill his normal duties as a singer or instrumentalist in the Temple worship (which could be almost any time in the history of Israel after the establishment of these positions).

I tend to favor the first alternative, since it seems from the language of the psalm that the writer is cut off from the land of Israel itself. But it is also possible, for instance, that the psalm reflects a situation where an ungodly king of Israel or Judah has instituted the worship of idols rather than the worship of Yahweh (hence, the references to the “unfaithful nation,” the “deceitful,” and the “wicked”); the psalmist finds himself exiled from the presence of God though still living within the land itself.

[Slide 4] *Discouragement and depression*

Whatever may have been the original background for the composition of this prayer of lament, it is not hard to relate to the feelings that it conveys, to the sense of discouragement and near-despair that has enveloped the psalmist.

I think, for instance, of some of you who have spoken to me about how badly you miss being able to come to church. So many of our people who were regularly here, week after week, until the pandemic hit, now find that they have been away from church for more than a year; some, more than two years. They feel such a loss and so disconnected. And when you’re disconnected from God’s presence and God’s people, it’s easy to begin to feel despondent and depressed.

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But I also think of a myriad of other situations that can leave a person down in the dumps, feeling discouraged, maybe not completely hopeless, but certainly far less than joyful.

Perhaps you've had a decline in your health, and suddenly you're facing a bunch of doctor appointments, a lot of expensive prescriptions, and restrictions on your life that you didn't want to deal with right now. Or perhaps it's a decline in a family member for whom you have to take responsibility—and your life just got way more complicated and way more stressful.

Maybe you're facing end-of-life issues, or later-in-life issues: your youthful glow and boundless energy and idealistic confidence are far in the rear-view mirror. Or maybe you're stuck in that middle-age funk, wondering what's next and what are you going to do with the rest of your life? Or you're young and thinking, who cares? Does anything even matter anymore? Or maybe you're just alive at whatever stage in life you happen to be at and you're thinking about the situation in the world and the nation that are threatening your peace, your livelihood, your future: you thought your life was supposed to be different than it has turned out. And then there are those personal, internal enemies, the voices in the back of your head that have got you all twisted up inside.

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For some of us, these feelings of discouragement are tied to recent developments or certain events that just happen to have all collided at once. But for others of us, these feelings are more of a constant companion, maybe even what we've come to believe is the normal state of affairs.

And let's be honest—always a good idea! Even if life is going pretty well, and you're not one of those people who are predisposed to drinking from the cup that's less than half full, there are still plenty of times when we find ourselves suddenly looking up from the bottom of a deep, deep well. There's a reason that there's more than a few songs that all have a similar title: the version I like is James Taylor's "Everybody Has the Blues."

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I'm not going to pretend that there's an easy fix to the problem of depression. And I certainly don't want to suggest that if you suffer from depression, all your troubles can be cured by listening to this sermon. But I do believe that there is help from God for all of us, including those of you who battle with depression in one or more of its various forms. And Psalms 42-43 is a great place to start to find God's help.

[Slide 8] *Lament (1)*

Let's start by noting what the psalmist says about his present situation in verses 1-4 of chapter 42. He describes his current experience as one of great sorrow, bewilderment, and unfulfilled longing. He feels completely empty;

thirsting for the presence of God, for the joy of worship, like a haggard deer searching for a rivulet of water in a dry desert.

It's a powerful image, a striking word-picture: thirst is more than just a desire or a feeling. It is an intense, driving need for something that is critical for life. Thirst demands satisfaction; it can't be turned aside by frivolous pursuits of lesser desires. The psalmist is keenly aware of his need for God, of his need for worship with the rest of God's people—and not just because it was fun and festive; but because it met his most inmost need to experience the presence of God.

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He is also battling with fear, with anxiety, and with opposition from other people who mock his faith and taunt him: "*Where is your God?*" I don't know if you've experienced this kind of opposition and verbal attack personally, or just vicariously through the media or by going online or through some other cultural vehicle. But there are plenty of voices who are quick to pounce on any opportunity to challenge Christian faith, or to taunt you for believing while demanding that you produce God and evidence of his care for you (or anyone). "*Where is your God? Why hasn't he helped you? I thought you said God cared . . . that he would save you . . . It doesn't much look like it to me. You're still just as stuck as the rest of us.*"

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The psalmist feels this opposition quite intensely. The taunting voices of the mockers are a constant source of pain to him—and he has no answer for them. They won't stop blasting him and tearing away at his faith. All he has is this nagging ache and tears that won't stop. In fact, he has begun to ask the same question: "*Where are you, God? Why haven't you helped me?*"

Have you ever been there? I know I have. When you're hit with all of these troubles; when you hear the taunting voices that are sowing seeds of doubt and skepticism into your mind; when you add to that your own insecurities and feelings of fear—it's not hard to start looking at everything around you through a filter that makes it look like you're completely on your own (which means, of course, that you will fail). And when you're looking through that filter, what you are seeing all around you looks like the absence of any tangible evidence of God's present involvement and help. So, it isn't hard to slip into what John Bunyan so aptly called the "slough of despond" in his great allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*.

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What makes the psalmist's present angst so painful is that he remembers when life was better. The lure of nostalgia tugs insistently at him; the delightful memories of what used to be won't let go. "*I remember when I used to go to the house of God. We had such a good time back then. Everything was great.*"

The problem is that nostalgic recollections just aren't strong enough to fight off doubts and fears and the creeping sense of emptiness. Nostalgic remembrances can't ease the desperate thirst in his soul for the reality of God's nearness and his help. "*I used to be happy*" just can't drive away the feeling that "*it's all in vain.*"

[Slide 12] *Refrain 1*

So, what does he do? Well, he starts by asking the obvious question (verse 5): "*Why am I so downcast, so discouraged?*" It's not really an analytical question, an attempt to figure out the problem so that he can find a solution. No, it's more of a complaint: "*Why do I feel this way? I'm not supposed to be this way. I used to be happy—but I'm not, and I don't like it.*" That's really what the first line of the refrain means this first time.

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Then he trots out the religious clichés: "*Come on, buck up! You know what the Bible says. You know what the preacher would say. Put your trust in God.*" He repeats the formulas he's learned: he says the right things, the things that are supposed to work; the things he's used before. But the problem is that they're just words as this point. They sound hopeful, but they are more of an expression of what he knows he is supposed to do, what he is supposed to say. But deep down, he doesn't feel like it matters. Still, he says the right things—and that is not insignificant.

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You see, if the pump hasn't been working for a while, you can wear yourself out pumping that handle as hard as you can and never get any water. Sometimes, you have to prime the pump to get it to work. You have to pour a little water down into the pump to force out the air and get the suction process working properly.

Bob Mendelsohn once taught me, "*Sometimes you have to say prayers before you can pray.*" In other words, sometimes, before you can really connect with God in prayer, you have to just start "*saying prayers,*" repeating words that are true that can stimulate your faith so that you can pray honestly and effectively, with conviction. That's what the psalmist is doing in the first refrain (verse 5). He's just getting started by priming the pump.

[Slide 15] *Lament (2)*

But we can tell where his heart is right at the start of the second lament (verses 6-10). The psalmist admits the truth. “*My soul is downcast within me. I am discouraged. I am depressed.*” He doesn’t hide anything or shy away from the stark reality of his emotional state: he is right in the middle of a spiritual wasteland in his heart and he knows it. So he admits it.

He is saddened by what has happened to him; he feels quite sharply the absence of God’s help. And he knows the doctrine of “*God loves me.*” He can mouth the words that “*God is here with me.*” But it’s one thing to know the doctrine and another to know the truth. He doesn’t feel loved by God. And he can’t sense God’s presence.

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It’s precisely at this point that the beginning of his transition happens, in the second part of verse 6. Having admitted the truth of his depression, the psalmist doesn’t just wallow in his despair: he starts doing the work of climbing out. Instead of just recalling the “good old days,” he chooses to recall something else: “*My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you.*”

He doesn’t just remember what he used to do, what he’s done in the past. He doesn’t drag up all of the good memories of yesteryear. He doesn’t just repeat the things he’s been told to do and to say, the cute sayings on decorations at Hobby Lobby. No, he declares, “*I will remember you. I will call to my mind the person of God. I will focus my mind on God himself; I will remind myself of who God is—his goodness, his power, his righteousness, his mercy, his unending, steadfast love for me.*” He chooses to hold on to the God whom he knows: “*my God,*” whom the world does not know and therefore mocks. He chooses to put his trust in the God who is *my Savior,*” even when he feels trapped and lost and out of God’s reach, far from his care and concern.

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In the last part of verse 6, we see him consciously calling to his mind what he has learned and experienced of God from earlier in his life. He mentions the familiar places in his past, significant places in his spiritual history—probably the area in which he grew up: in the northern portion of Israel, near the upper section of the Jordan River as it starts out below Mount Hermon. The reference to the Jordan is not happenstance: in his spiritual thirst he thinks of the iconic river, a constant source of water in an arid land. His physical home in his earlier life was near that consistent source of life-giving water, just as his spiritual home in his younger years was near to the river of God that flows from his throne, symbolized in the temple. And he is far from both of them now—but he is intentionally

recalling those truths to remind himself of who God is, to re-orient his mind to the reality of God his Savior.

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As he does, however, the psalmist suddenly feels overwhelmed. The imagery shifts from a gently flowing river providing life-sustaining water to the powerful roar of a cascading waterfall and waves crashing upon the shore. He desperately needs God; he longs for God's presence—but the God whom he needs is overwhelming. And to come to that God means coming to the one who will break you even while he loves you.

“All your waves and breakers have swept over me.” His words remind us that God is not a toy. He is not just a “fix” for your troubles, something to pacify your fears so that you can continue on your way more easily. He is the Almighty God, before whose presence the mountains collapse and the sky tears away.

It is a good thing to recognize who God is, to be shaken and humbled and bowed down before him. It is good to know the fear of the Lord, to come to him in desperation and in sorrow, to know that without him your thirst can never be satisfied.

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But it's just as important to know what he states in verse 8: the psalmist recalls the love of God. He reminds himself of God's love for him, which gives him the encouragement he needs to sing his prayer to the Lord, both in the day—when the enemies are all around him in force—and in the night—when all is dark, and fears are quickly magnified, and it is easier to surrender to despair. He calls on *“the God of my life”*: the God whom I know and serve; the God who loves me; the God who fills my life and walks with me each day, wherever I am.

But he has not forgotten his basic problem: *“Where is God?”* His troubles have not gone away, and his discouragement has not yet lifted. He repeats his concern (verses 9-10). The truth is that his life is filled with plenty of causes for his depression. The taunting of his enemies is real, and gives him constant anxiety. The lack of apparent answers from God, the absence of any perceptible action on God's part to lift his mood or bring the answer to his problem gives him great distress. His mental anguish is intense; it has even caused him to suffer physically.

So, he takes the next step of faith. It's just a step, but it is a step in the same direction he took when he began this section, a step in the direction of escape from despair and toward hope.

[Slide 20] *Refrain 2*

The second refrain has the same words as the first refrain, but the tone has changed. Where the first one was complaint and clichè, the start of the process of getting his heart right, the second refrain is now an argument—an argument with his own soul.

The psalmist is struggling with the reality of his own emotional turmoil. He is desperate for God’s presence and waiting for God to answer. But he’s genuinely in distress and wondering what is going on. He’s mindful of his own need to trust in God so that he doesn’t just give in to despair. But he can’t shake his own feelings of gloom and despondency. So, he’s arguing with himself, and giving himself the best counsel he can come up with—which happens to be exactly the right counsel. And what he’s left with is this: determination. *“Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”*

There are times when faith comes easily, when the path is strewn with lots of evidence of God’s faithfulness and love, and they are all easily seen. And there are other times when faith comes simply by sheer determination; what a pastor of mine once called, “bare, naked faith.” Those are the times when nothing feels like it’s real, when your prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling back at you, and the sense of God is as far from your heart and mind as the ocean is from Kansas.

That’s when you fall back on determination. I have decided. I have set my faith like my face—straightforward toward the place of God’s presence. I may be downcast—and I may have a really loud argument with my soul about that—but at the end of the day I’m giving orders to my feelings, to my soul, to my doubts and fears: *“Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. I will trust him.”*

[Slide 21] *Prayer*

That’s when the psalmist comes to the third act of this little personal drama. He turns from lament and complaint to specific, heartfelt prayer. There are two parts to his prayer—and both matter.

The first part is his prayer for vindication. Normally we think of vindication as simply being proven right—and that is certainly an important aspect of his prayer. But being proven right about what? The psalmist is asking for God to prove him right, to answer the taunt of his enemies, to show up and prove that he is his savior by delivering him from his enemies. He is asking God to rescue him from their constant badgering *by showing them that he is here and that their wickedness will not go unpunished.* The psalmist is asking for God to reveal himself, to bring down the wicked, to exalt the righteous, to put things right, and to give him a reason to rejoice again—because God has brought his kingdom into

this world and brought order to the chaos. He declares his need for God and repeats his request quite forcefully: “*You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?*” (By the way, God is not bothered by repeated requests for genuine needs—unless he has already told you “no.”)

And let’s note this as well; this part of his prayer is not just asking God to take away his sadness, to make him feel better. He is asking God to bring an end to the domination of the deceitful, the unfaithful, the wicked. He is asking God to heal the world, not just take away his anxiety and depression.

[Slide 22] *The key to his deliverance*

That brings us to the second part of his prayer, which in many ways, is the most important step in his movement from despair to hope; it is the key to his deliverance. The psalmist asks God for a way out of his despondency—and he prays for exactly the right thing. He doesn’t just complain and cry and ask God to make him happy again. No, he prays a desperate but faithful prayer: verse 3—and here I have to part ways with the NIV. The ESV, NASB, and NLT all translate this verse like this, and I believe it is a better representation of the Hebrew text here: “*Send out your light and your truth; let them lead [NLT: “guide”] me.*”

“*Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me.*” He prays for God to do more than simply make him feel better; he prays for God to make him better. The psalmist recognizes that he is utterly dependent upon God’s enlightenment if he is going to escape the “slough of despond.” He needs to know how to live in the truth, to walk in the light of God’s ways instead of living according to the deceitful, unfaithful, wicked ways of the world that surrounds him. It is only the light of God’s truth that will dispel the darkness and put an end to his confusion and anxiety.

The psalmist knows that he won’t be well until he’s back in the presence of God. But the only way to get there is by following the light and the truth of God’s word and ways. They will lead him back to the place of the fulness of God’s presence, where he can again experience the goodness of God in the land of the living. It is what he needs to get free from the despondency and despair of his current situation.

[Slide 23] *Refrain 3*

His final refrain again has the same words, but the tone is even more different than before. Now the psalmist is confident, despite his lingering anxieties. Now he is looking back from the place of assured victory. Now his question has a completely new ring about it: “*Why, my soul, are you downcast?*”

Why so disturbed within me? There's no reason any longer! Remember who God is! Follow him, follow his light and his truth and he will guide you home!" Now he is bold— *"Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."* Now he is set: his heart is determined to trust God and he expects to be restored to the presence of God. His instrument is tuned; he is ready to re-take his place in the temple worship choir. All that is missing is for God to come and deliver him—which is no longer in doubt. Despondency has been dashed; depression has been broken. Hope is alive and praise is the order of the day: praise for what God has done and for what he is yet to do.

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Earlier in the service we sang a song, "As the deer." The first verse is taken straight from the opening verse of this psalm. The words of the rest of the song represent the composer's own musing on his need for God and what it means to seek God. And one of the key measures to determine if I'm seeking God or just looking to feel better comes in the chorus and again in the second verse: "You alone": that's really the test—am I seeking God alone? Or do I just want to be happy instead of sad? Then comes the declaration: "I love you more than any other." There is the choice point, the point at which I must find the true setting of my heart: Do I love Jesus more than anything else? If I do—or if I'm not sure but I want to—then the answer to my discouragement, my distress, is to fall back on determination, to choose once again to trust God: *"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."*

[Slide 25]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction/Blessing

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]
Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership*