

Psalm 42 Discouragement and Desire

Psalm 42:1 <To the Chief Musician. A Contemplation of the sons of Korah.> As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? 3 My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, "Where *is* your God?" 4 When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And *why* are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him *For* the help of His countenance.

6 O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar. 7 Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; All Your waves and billows have gone over me. 8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song *shall be* with me-- A prayer to the God of my life. 9 I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" 10 As with a breaking of my bones, My enemies reproach me, While they say to me all day long, "Where *is* your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

NKJ Psalm 43:1 Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! 2 For You *are* the God of my strength; Why do You cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? 3 Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle. 4 Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God. (Ps. 42:1-43:5)

It is a common mistake of young believers to think that their Christian life will be one of permanent encouragement. So if discouragement comes along, they wonder if there is something terribly wrong with them, or if they are saved at all. Not all discouragement is sinful. Spurgeon once said, "We have our times of natural sadness; we have too, our times of depression, when we cannot do otherwise than hang our heads. Seasons of lethargy also befall us from changes in our natural frame, or from weariness, or the rebound from over excitement. The trees are not always green, the sap sleeps in them in the winter; and we have winters too. Life cannot always be at flood tide..."

The problem is not seasons of downheartedness; the problem is what we do when we are there. C.S. Lewis once said, "If Satan's arsenal of weapons were restricted to a single one, it would be discouragement." After all, discouragement takes the fight out of everything else. Lust and envy and anger and hatred are evil, but we notice them and fight against them. They are loud and noisy sins. But in discouragement, we lose the will to fight altogether. Discouragement just saps the life out of everything, and leads to the weak but quiet sins of apathy, self-pity, cowardice, laziness, and even resentment and bitterness. Discouragement may not be the sin, but a failure to deal with it properly almost always leads to more sin.

Here is a song about discouragement. It is a song about how true believers may find themselves in the dread darkness of depression, faintheartedness, and gloom. But it is not an ancient Hebrew form of the blues. It is a song about what a believer is to do in his seasons of overwhelming discouragement. You see that in the title, where it is called a "Contemplation" of the sons of Korah. That word is the Hebrew *maskil*, which means *to make someone wise, or to instruct*. This is a song that instructs, or a song that is wisely crafted. It is a song that instructs us about discouragement and hope, about delighting in God when circumstances are dark and dreary.

We don't know who wrote it. It is said to be of or for the sons of Korah. You remember Korah was

the rebellious man who died when challenging Moses, but his family was not all judged. In the time of David, the sons of Korah were an order of priests responsible for singing. So this may have been written by them, in which case it is anonymous, or it may have been written for them to sing. And if it was written for them, then the most likely candidate is David. So much of this Psalm simply sounds like David, and if so, may have been composed when in exile by his son Absalom.

Psalm 42 and 43 are very likely two parts of one original song. You can see the structure of this poem as basically three stanzas with a refrain, or a chorus. Verses 1-4 are followed by 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And *why* are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him *For* the help of His countenance.

The verses 6 through 10 are the next stanza, followed again by the same refrain. The third section is 43:1-4, concluded again with the same refrain.

But here we have a seasoned believer, one mature enough for God to inspire his words and use them as Scripture, describing very painful and difficult discouragement. But what shows that this man was mature was how he tackled it. In this psalm we will see what causes his discouragement, how he confronted his discouragement, and the cure for his discouragement.

I. The Causes of His Discouragement

The psalmist faced discouraging things both outside and inside of him, both in his external circumstances and his internal pain in his mind and emotions.

Externally, we see three discouraging things.

First, it seems he was distant from God. He was in some kind of exile. He was away from home, and not by choice.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. **When shall I come and appear before God?**

He is talking about being at the place of corporate worship, at the Tabernacle. Look in 43:3: Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle.

But he is far from it and unable to get there. Where was he? Verse 6 tells us: 6 O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar.

He was far north from Jerusalem, close to Mount Hermon, where the snow melts and becomes the Jordan river. Though it is a beautiful place, he misses more than anything being at worship. He is homesick for the presence of God and the people of God. And as he thinks about the distance in space between where he wants to be and where he is, memories come back of better days.

4 When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.

He is haunted by memories of sweet times of spiritual refreshing and joy, and now it seems cold and empty. He feels far from home, and far from God.

Maybe you have felt most discouraged when some rather massive change comes into your life. You lose the things most familiar to you: family, health, job, place. You feel disoriented, perplexed, and feel rootless, aimless. And adding to all the turmoil is if your relationship with God has suffered. The trial overwhelmed you with busyness and actions, and God slipped further and further from your heart and mind. Now you remember times of spiritual awakening, you remember seasons of intense prayer, of illumination in the Word, of excitement to be in God's house. The memories are sweet, but also bring guilt and pain.

A second aspect of his external pain was that he was disdained, oppressed and taunted by unbelievers.

3 My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, "Where *is* your God?"
10 As with a breaking of my bones, My enemies reproach me, While they say to me all day long, "Where *is* your God?"

The taunt "Where is your God?" implies that something else has gone wrong too, or they wouldn't be saying, "Where is your God?" It looks to them like he has been abandoned. He has lost something: maybe his health, maybe his position, maybe his wealth. Whatever it is, it is enough for the surrounding unbelievers to taunt him: "So much for your faith and devotion! A lot of good it brought you! Where is your great God now, when you need him?"

When you find yourself in a place either of spiritual darkness, or of circumstances that are painful, Satan will have on hand some of his children to quickly tell you, "See, you're wasting your life with this Christianity! I told you so!" Or there'll be those unbelievers of Psalm 73, seemingly living pain-free, problem-free lives, and they'll parade their arrogance before you, and say, "Still a church-girl, hey?" "Still hoping your genie in the sky will solve your problems, are you?" And those seem to wound deeper than the circumstances.

The third external discouragement he faced was that God seemed to be delaying His response to his prayers.

9 I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

2 For You *are* the God of my strength; Why do You cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

He had been praying about his trial. He had been asking God to remove the trial, and remove the ability of his enemy to taunt and oppress. He's been reminding God that these enemies were blaspheming and that God's own name was on the line. He couldn't understand why the trial seemed to drag on, why the exile didn't end, why God didn't just deliver in a moment?

As the book of Job shows it is not always the intensity of the trial that discourages us, it is the length of the trial. It is when no relief seems to come. And when that drags on, we are tempted to think dark thoughts about God. Here God allows one of his saints to write words that end up in the Bible: "Why have you forgotten me?" Why won't you fix this, God, if you love me? Why won't you heal my body, or bring the money we need, or end this strife at home, or change the job circumstance, or bring that spouse, or convert that child or spouse, or turn it around.

Externally, he is distant from God, he is being disparaged by unbelievers, and he is experiencing delayed deliverance from God. We think of one who once hung on a Cross for us, distant from God, being disparaged by unbelievers, and experiencing what felt like delayed deliverance, as He cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

That leads us to look at his internal state.

The clearest description of what he is feeling is repeated three times: verse 5, verse 11, and 43:5. There we see two words for what he is experiencing: cast down, and disquieted.

Cast down (from *shachach*) – which means to sink down, to be dissolved. Strength is melting, your zeal and motivation is dissolving. You don't want to face the day or get out of bed in the morning. Disquieted is the word *hamah*, which means to be murmuring, noisy, restless, disquieted. Your soul is noisy, unhappy, restless, fidgety, anxious. Discouragement is both a loss of strength, and also a loss of peace inside.

3 My tears have been my food day and night,
He is discouraged to the point of crying at times during the day, and at times during the night. His soul is full of sorrow. He has likely lost his appetite.

When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul within me. (Ps. 42:4)
He feels drained, as if this is sucking the life out of him.

7 Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; All Your waves and billows have gone over me.
He says that he feels as if he is drowning. Life is overwhelming him, and he cannot keep his head above water.
Again, this sounds like what the Lord felt during His Passion. He said to His disciples, “My soul is sorrowful, even unto death.”

Now that is a pretty timeless description of discouragement. We feel distant from God, other people don't understand us and even oppress or bully us, and we don't see answers from God. On the inside we then feel like we don't want to go on, like our thoughts are being churned up, like sadness fills our days, and like life is just swallowing us up.

But if that is all the psalm did, it would just be a very good poem describing a very universal experience. But it does a lot more than that. It shows how a believer responds to this discouragement.

II. The Confrontation with His Discouragement

Now here is the central difference between this psalmist and a man just wallowing in self-pity. The statement repeated three times in this psalm is nothing less than the psalmist confronting himself. He asks himself, why are you cast down, my soul? Why are you disquieted?

Lloyd-Jones: “The main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self...Have you realized that most of your 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 start talking to you, they bring back the problem of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalm 42] was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself, ‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul?’ he asks. His soul had been repressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: ‘Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you’.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. 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 disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: ‘I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God’.

Here the idea is to confront yourself with real questions. Self, you are discouraged and gloomy. Why? Give an account! What have you lost? What have you missed out on? Why was that so

important to you?

Instead of just feeling our feelings, we demand that they justify their existence. Why are you this way, and is it right?

We have an example of this in 1 Samuel 30, which we read this morning. **1 Samuel 30:1** Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, 2 and had taken captive the women and those who were there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried *them* away and went their way. 3 So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. 4 Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. 5 And David's two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. 6 Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God. (1 Sam. 30:1-6)

David had been hunted by Saul for years. Finally, driven by desperation David went to live among the Philistines and became a servant of king Achish. He fought battles for him, though he had never had to fight against his own people - the Israelites. The king gave David and his men and their families a city to live in - Ziklag. One day, the Philistines are about to go out to battle, and David and his men are called to join them. The lords of the Philistines are upset, and do not trust David. King Achish sends him back. Upon returning to Ziklag, they find that the Amalekites have seized the opportunity to attack the land with all the soldiers gone. They have attacked Ziklag, carried off all the woman and children, the spoil, and burned everything else.

And now, after all David has done, after all the sacrifices for Saul, all the victories for Israel, all the ways he tried to do right, even for this group of a few hundred down and outers, his own men now speak about stoning him. He has hit rock bottom. He has lost his position in Israel. He went over to the other side, only to find that they do not trust him. Now the whole thing seems to have blown up in his face. He couldn't fight for Israel, he couldn't fight against Israel – rejected by Saul, rejected by the Philistines, sent home, only to find that other enemies have destroyed the very things they have been fighting for – their homes and families. David has no friend to comfort him, his wives are gone, no Samuel to turn to, no family. The men are furious at David – he should have killed Saul when he had the chance, he is a fool in their eyes, and it's his fault that this has happened.

He has lost everything, he has nowhere to turn as far as people go, no support, no one to cheer him up.

But what does the text say he did? David strengthened himself. We might expect the text to say, and David was encouraged by the Lord. Or we might expect the wording to be more passive, David became encouraged, David received encouragement. But it does not say that. The wording is emphatic. David (subject) encouraged (verb) himself (object). Who did the encouraging? David did.

Now, David did not encourage himself with himself. He didn't look within and say, "cheer up, Davey boy! Don't be so glum! Tomorrow's another day! Up and at 'em! He didn't mutter motivational speaker clichés to himself and just try to get going.

David said something like, "Why are you cast down, oh my soul? Why are you disquieted within me?" Hope in God!" And we'll see in a moment the content of that hope in God. But what I want us to see is that David encouraged himself. David took the initiative to make sure he was encouraged. David knew the truth: you are responsible for your own joy. It's no one else's responsibility to make you happy or keep you encouraged.

David did not listen to himself, he preached to himself. He refused to heed the voices of despair and doubt and gloom and doom. Too many Christians become victims of their own discouragement. Their thoughts are discouraging them, but then they act like victims, passive victims of these

discouraging thoughts, as if Satan just injected discouragement into their souls. But here Scripture shows us by two examples that we must confront our discouragement.

Indeed, when Jesus was sorrowful unto death, he confronted his sorrow. 27 "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour ' ? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 "Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came from heaven, *saying*, "I have both glorified *it* and will glorify *it* again." (Jn. 12:27-28)

Now that leads us to a final question: what do we preach to ourselves? What did David, or this psalmist, if they were different people, preach to himself?

III. The Cure For His Discouragement

The psalmist tells himself three times to hope in God. Here are four ways that he hopes in God.

a. He remembers God's sovereign love for him.

8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song *shall be* with me-- A prayer to the God of my life.

The psalmist says, God will not simply attempt to love me, or love me with my permission. God will command His lovingkindness over him. He thinks of God as both good (he is loving) and great (He is sovereign and can command). Even though he exaggerates and says that he feels as if God has forgotten him, he still knows that God is in final and loving control of his life.

So at the end of verse 7, he says, "All *Your* waves and billows have gone over me.

For a New Testament believer looking at life through the lens of the Cross, sovereign love is clearer than ever.

There is nothing to encourage a believer than to combine God's total control with His total love, and look at your circumstances through that lens. Are you discouraged? Do you still believe God is on the throne, ordering all things? Do you still believe He loves you and if He "did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). If it is your circumstances that are discouraging you, then see them as passing through the intentional hands of a loving Father. If it is your own sin that is discouraging you, then as someone has rightly said, "Cheer up! You're a lot worse than you thought!" In other words, you are crest-fallen for how bad you are and how you have failed, but you don't know the half of it! But there is One who does, who has owned your debt and paid it Himself. He has said to your soul, "Peace, Be still!"

Take firm hold on God's sovereign and omnipotent greatness, and with the other hand take firm hold on God's sovereign omnipotent goodness, and you will find yourself hoping in God.

b. He thirsts for God.

As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Here is another mark that this psalmist is a mature man of God. He is not thirsting mainly for relief from his threatening circumstances. He is not thirsting mainly for escape from his enemies or for their destruction. He is not even just thirsting for an end to his internal pain. He is thirsting for God. Like a thirsty doe or hart pants for water, so the psalmist knows his greatest need is God Himself. He is thirsty for God, for a return of deeper devotion and worship and knowledge.

When you're depressed, your main need is to seek more of God Himself, not just relief. It might seem like the last thing you want or need, but it is the ultimate and most important thing you need.

Knowing and loving God is at the very heart of the human condition. No change in circumstance will ever remedy the restlessness that comes from being distant from God. To actively thirst after God is to hope in Him: to say to yourself and to Him that He is the true reward and solution.

c. He keeps praying for relief.

Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! 2 For You are the God of my strength³ Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle.

Since his priorities are right, he can ask God again for deliverance. He prays for vindication, and for deliverance. He prays that God will send light and truth and revive him and bring him back to Jerusalem.

When you have put first things first, you can come back to that thing you are praying for, and pray it again, but this time with a submitted, surrendered heart. Lord, end this trial, bring that money we need, bring the physical healing, bring the job, bring the ministry opportunity, bring the spouse, the child, the conversion. But now that prayer has the tagline- but Lord, if You do not, You Yourself are enough. This is hoping in God.

d. He sings.

for I shall yet praise Him *For* the help of His countenance.

For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God. V11, 43:5)

8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song *shall be* with me-- A prayer to the God of my life.

The psalmist turns his thoughts into praise – musical praise. He knows that one of the best ways to lift the human soul out of gloom is to sing it out of gloom. “Yes, but I don't feel like singing!” Right, we don't only sing when we have joy, we sing so as to get joy. As William Cowper, who struggled greatly with depression, wrote in his hymn,

*Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in His wings;
When comforts are declining,
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining,
To cheer it after rain.*

Paul and Silas didn't sing in the stocks when in prison because they were having a great time; they sang so as to have an attitude of rejoicing before the Lord. Part of hoping in God is singing, or humming or whistling that hymn that exalts God and reminds us of His promises, and sets our affections on Him. Singing is like gratitude. It is not just a response when we are feeling sunny. It is an act of submission even when we aren't.

This is what it is to hope in God. It is to confront your discouragement and assess it. Maybe you are justly disappointed and sorrowful. Maybe you are unjustly sorrowful having loved something too much, or wanted something God does not want for you. Maybe you are correctly disappointed in your own actions, or maybe your pride has magnified the sense of failure. But what it is to be godly is to confront your discouragement as David did, as the psalmist did, as Jesus did. And having

honestly assessed it, you choose not to wallow in self-pity, but to fix your thoughts on God: His sovereign love, on the pleasure of seeking and finding Him, on His throne of grace that gives help in time of need. You rest in His love, you thirst for Him, you pray, and then you sing.