

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

Dr. George O. Wood

The psalm tonight is Psalm 42 & 43. Actually those two psalms shouldn't be separated by a division. They belong together as you will see. There is a dominating question in the psalm. It's found three times. The psalm is organized around that question which is thrice repeated. 42:5 "Why are you downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me? [verse 11] Why are you downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me? [43:5] Why are you downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me?"

This psalm is a psalm for people going through depression. If you're not in depression this evening I hope I don't put you into it. So often when you talk on the theme of depression everybody gets depressed. I hope this psalm will have two applications. First of all that the Lord will use it as a kind of deposit in your life for times when you face depression. And second there are those, I'm sure there are, going through moments in their life tonight where you feel very lonely and discouraged. That the Lord will use this psalm to encourage you.

Notice underneath Psalm 42 it says "For the director of music, a *maskil* for the sons of Korah." I'll comment on that. There are a number of psalms written by this group – the sons of Korah – evidently those that ministered, that sung in the temple precincts. The idea of their being a group – the sons of Korah – shows us that our day is not the first day to have its gospel groups. It's a ministry group. They've come together to sing and as a part, the Holy Spirit came upon them to compose these songs. It's too bad we don't have the original music to go with them. We have no idea what they sounded like when they were sung. But the words are there. It's called a *maskil*.

There's some discussion what *maskil* means. The footnote in the NIV suggests that it is a literary or musical term. Others say it simply means a poem of insight. A poem that sets down instruction and this may well be the case. It is a very frank discussion by the psalmist of what he is feeling.

The Lord lets us express our feelings. Some Christians unfortunately say you never reveal your feelings. You just talk gospel truth and doctrine. But the psalms allow us to be vulnerable and open and honest. I think one of the great things that has happened in the last number of years in the body of Jesus Christ is we learn to open up to one another and learn that it's ok that we're feeling down to say to somebody, I'm down, I'm hurting. Would you pray for me? Would you listen to me? Would you give me counsel?

In a book by a man named Davis, the title A Sense to be Vulnerable. He was advocating, those who were Christian leaders, those who occupy positions in a pulpit ministry that one of the great things we can do for our people is open up our own life and show that we're not some plasticized kind of Christians who always have the Pepsodent grin on our face and act as if nothing ever goes wrong in our own life. The way the Holy Spirit opens up to people through ministry is when we are in places of leadership, open to be vulnerable in our own experience.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, opens himself to be vulnerable and talks about the fact that he glories in his weaknesses and recounts some of those weaknesses where all the super apostles were recounting their strengths. On another occasion Paul says Moses, when he came down from the

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

mountain and kept the veil on his face it wasn't because the glory was continuing but he kept the veil because he was afraid to disclose himself to people. The glory on his face had gone down. He kept the veil on lest people think he was no longer as spiritual as he was when he had received the law. Paul says "We with an unveiled face [that is with vulnerability in our lives] are looking to Jesus and we are being changed as we look at him from glory to glory, from one level of spiritual maturity to another." The psalmist here is reflecting that kind of thing.

There are some dimensions of depression that are covered in this psalm. First we need to look at the sources of depression that are here.

In any discussion on depression you can find all kinds of reasons for being depressed and the psalmist is not trying to give a whole catalogue on all the reasons why you can be depressed. Maybe you can be depressed because the chemical balance in your body is not right. Maybe because you're not sleeping enough or you're sleeping too much or you're not eating right or you're eating the wrong things or you're not eating at all. Sometimes depression is physically related.

Other times we're depressed we have very good reasons. When we lose someone close to us in death or when we've gone through some kind of wrenching personal experience that's a time to be depressed.

There is chronic depression. There is acute depression. Chronic depression being a kind of habitual state of mind where we find ourselves rather depressed continually. Acute depression coming as a result of the interventions in our life which are sorrowful in nature.

The psalmist here has a particular kind of depression. It's caused first of all by separation. A number of persons he feels separated from. He feels for example separated from God, verse 2. "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet God?" And certainly in depression probably the person we feel cut off from is God. That's why in depression it's very difficult for us to pray. I find this in my own life, when I'm depressed it's all I can do to say "Lord." To open the scripture and have God's word speak to me. And it doesn't help me when I am depressed for someone to tell me, You need to be reading your Bible more. That just lays more guilt upon me and makes me realize what a worthless character I am anyway. I know that. I preach the word regularly. I should be opening my Bible more.

But we're in depression. We feel separated from the Lord and we thirst for God yes but we don't know when he is going to show up, to have that personal conversation with us, that ability of his to wrap his spiritual arms around us and say, It's ok. To give us a Pentecost experience for example. To banish all the sadness in our life and to fill us with joy, rich joy. The psalmist sees that. He sees that he's not only separated from God but he is separated from others. Verse 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."

Leading the multitude, going. Evidently he was in a priestly role. Israel was known for its feasts. Seven major feasts that are prescribed for each twelve months within the biblical calendar. Times of great joy. Maybe here the psalmist is reflecting upon the greatest and joyous feast in Israeli life, which is the Feast of Tabernacles, the one truly momentous joyful experience of the fall when all the crops are in and the people of God remember how God sustained them

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

when they slept out under the stars in the Sinai in the years of wandering. A time of great rejoicing.

And now for whatever reason, and the psalm itself gives us some clues as to why he's separated but he can no longer go with the crowd. He is what we would call a shut in. As a shut in he has the four walls and ceiling closing in on him and he is cut off from his friends.

There are really two kinds of loneliness when you think of it. There is the loneliness of isolation where we are like the psalmist and we are cut off from physical contact with people and from great occasions in our life. I don't think anything's harder for a person who is ill who loves the Lord than to be cut off from the body of Christ. There is the loneliness of isolation, being physically cut off.

But there's another kind of loneliness. It is the loneliness of insulation where we may be physically with people and yet feel apart, feel that the other person really doesn't understand us and the person who is closest to us in life still doesn't understand us. We feel physiologically and spiritually we are an island and we'd like to reach out and have someone truly understand us and empathize with us and be a partner with us in life. But we are alone.

The psalmist is perhaps describing both kinds of loneliness – the loneliness of isolation and the loneliness of insulation.

Separation from others is loneliness. It's wrenching. That's why divorce is such an awful experience. Why death is such an awful experience. Why moving and relocating is such an awful experience. And why young people when they leave home go through this terrible wrenching thing called homesickness. We are isolated. And in many instances insulated as well.

The psalmist also feels obviously cut off from great moments. The last part in verse 4 indicates that he used to go in times of festival. It's like having Christmas alone.

He reflects even in verse 6 gives a hint that he the psalmist is away from his natural habitat. "I will remember you from the land of Jordan..." He is feeling separated from the area in which he grew up and his reaction is one of weeping.

The depression is coming because he feels separated.

The second reason he gives for feeling depressed is that there is an apparent defeat in his life. A sense of loss. In fact if you read the psalm carefully you will note that the psalmist makes mention of his enemies but not of his friends. In the absence of reference to his friends shows that his focus is upon the defeat in his life which has been occasioned by his enemies who are saying to him in verse 3 and 10 of Psalm 42 "Where is your God?" And he is saying himself to God in 42:9 "Why has thou forsaken me?"

It would appear that the loss that he feels in life has to do with a physical ailment in his body which has brought him to a place of total rejection and bewilderment.

We want to look next not just at the sources of depression but at the stages of depression in his life. For the psalm moves clearly through three distinct stages of depression. Each one of them ending with this soliloquy where he says "Why are you downcast O my soul? Why so disturbed

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

within me?” If you take those questions and let it stand at the end of a particular movement of thought it makes a lot of sense in interpreting this psalm.

His first stage of depression, as often hits in depression is one of total dejection. He absolutely has hit the floor and you could scrape him off the floor. There are three reasons within the first five verses for finding him totally dejected.

One is that he is spiritually dry. “As the deer pants for streams of water...” he has here the vision in the Judean wilderness or in a dry area of a deer that is looking for that refreshing liquid, who is panting as she searches for the water. “As that deer is thirsty, so my soul pants for you, O God.” That’s how dry I am. It’s been a long time since I have felt filled with your Spirit. It’s been a long time since I have felt comforted by you. It’s been a long time since you appeared and made yourself emotionally real to me. O Lord I really feel dry. I know, God, that you’re there. Intellectually I can accept that. I know where my commitments and priorities of life have been. But Lord, can’t you do something about how empty I feel? How totally dry I am.”

Have you ever felt that way in your walk with the Lord? I’m sure if you’ve followed the Lord any degree of time you know what that experience is – dejection because we feel like for some reason we’ve lost touch from God. Often the reason why we feel like we’ve lost touch is that added to our dejection is a sense of our own personal responsibility. When we are depressed we simply start bringing guilt upon ourselves and we find that every little thing that is wrong in our life becomes magnified as it becomes another reason we use for why God has abandoned us. God surely wouldn’t have anything to do with me after I’ve done that, or felt that, or thought that.

In addition to feeling spiritually dry as a part of his dejection is he’s ravaged by sorrows. “My tears have been my food night and day. While men say to me all day long, where is your God?” There’s some depression that does not come out in tears. I think almost an easier depression is where you can weep.

There is a value to weeping. I always tell people when they’re going through grief at a time of death, don’t be afraid to cry. Cry. It’s the best thing you can do. If you try to be stoic saying, God’s giving me the strength to go through this and I’m ok and everything is going to work out wonderful and I know I’ll meet them again in the resurrection. I know they’re stating theological truth but I immediately start worrying about them emotionally. I know that 4 to 5 weeks down the road all of a sudden one day it’s going to hit like a ton of bricks. It’s better to let the tears out. The deeper kind of depression is when we hurt so bad we can’t cry.

Then of course there’s this longing for the past. Verse 4. This yearning for simpler times. Lord, if I could just recapture the experience I had with you when I was first saved, or first filled with the Spirit. Many times we make an idol so to speak out of an initial experience we’ve had with the Lord and presume that that place is meant to permanently express our relationship with the Lord. When in fact it’s following the Lord is like the topography of Israel. There are valleys and there are mountains. Dry places and oases. Fertile valleys and mountain trails. The whole of life is meant to be lived. The Lord leads us as his flock through those very areas of our life.

He’s longing for the past, talking to himself as we do in depression. His reflection stirs to memory how God has helped him in the past. That’s a good thing. When we can look back in the midst of depression and remember that God has pulled us out before, been with us in other

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

times when the Spirit of the Lord as come upon us. That may be the beginning of his coming out of depression to remember that he has had good times, that it's not been all bad.

He asks himself after he thinks of being with the festive throng, Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Then he answers it: put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. So the first time there is a ray of sunshine in the psalmist. He breaks his total dejection by looking to the fact that his hope is in the Lord and the future holds promise because God is in the future.

Depression comes in cycles. We think we're out of it only to find that the next day or the next evening or the next hour it has returned with all it's violent intensity. Maybe that depression returns because of something we had hoped to take place which would trigger a permanent joy has not happened and we have a relapse instead.

His next refrain or series of verses has to do with bewilderment. He has felt dejected, now he becomes bewildered. Verses 6-11 his high moment of faith is fleeting. The old thoughts begin to return. Verse 6 "My soul is downcast within me. Therefore I will remember you."

He has the strange sense in this bewilderment of the two pulls now in his life. The bewilderment is occasioned because on the one hand he knows that God is with him. But on the other hand he has the feeling that God has left him. In verses 7, 8 he is really being pulled by the sense the Lord is yet with me. "Deep calls to deep. All your waves and breakers have swept over me." He's feeling washed and refreshed by the depths of the cleansing water and joyous water that is in God.

One commentator has said about this phrase deep calls unto deep. I'm sure that from a strictly exegetical point of view has misinterpreted the actual words of the passage. But the thought is so good I'm going to join him in his misinterpretation. He's talking about deep calling unto deep and then immediately he talks about waterfalls. You're thinking height. But this particular person says there are depths in the creative order that call to other depths.

For example, the moon all the time is calling to the sea and bidding the oceans of the world to rise and fall. If the moon wasn't just in the right relationship to earth distance wise it would inundate us with a tidal wave twice a day. If it were further away it wouldn't produce the sufficient motions to keep this gyro of earth on its proper course. So there are depths which you cannot see. Gravitational depths within the moon calling to the oceans to rise and fall on a regulated course.

There are depths within nature calling to seed that is planted in soil that is nourished by sun and rain. Depth within God's created order, calling to the seed to spring to life. There are vast instances of depths where there are birds that fly hundreds and even thousands of miles something programmed within them. A depth calling them. A depth calling the salmon to swim upstream. A depth calling animals to wind their way across trackless expanses and lay eggs or bear their young. There are deeps in God which call to us that bid us to rise and as far as we may feel ourselves separated from God yet there is that pull of God toward us and we feel the spiritual gravitational pull directing our thoughts and our hearts toward him. Deep is calling unto deep. The love of God and the certainty of God is pulling us. The psalmist feels that.

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

But he also feels God has left him. Ten times in this psalm which embraces both chapter 42 and 43. Ten times he uses this word “why.”

We ask, Lord, why is this happening to me? Is it because you’re not here? Is it because you do not care? Is it because I have failed? Or could it possibly be that through this low time in my life you will accomplish a good.

Obviously God is always here. Always God cares. Many times I have failed. But even in the failure God has purposed to accomplish his good and I must be reminded of that.

I love the theology of scripture that says God always comes to bat in the bottom of the ninth inning. No matter how far behind we feel in our emotional life God will always have the last crack of the bat in our lives. That’s what the psalmist is pulling for so that he comes to the close of the second verse saying, “My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me saying to me all day long, Where is your God? Why are you downcast O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.” Here is the affirmation. No matter how deep the depression, he is saying, I will still believe in God.

We might say in our own life, Lord, no matter how far I feel cut off from you I would rather be in a depression, suffer depression as a Christian than as a non Christian. As a non Christian I am totally cut off from any hope and from any healing. But I will yet hope in you. In the times I did not know you, I have you. I’m sure, Lord, that you have the final outcome even though my emotions may be suggesting to me to abandon hope. You, Lord, will have the last word.

The psalm then moves into the third stanza. The cycle goes from one where the psalmist has felt a sense of deep depression and loss and confusion to now one of feeling certain. The movement has been dejection, bewilderment, then finally in 43:1-5 certainty. Verses 1-2 he finally reaches the point where he turns his case over to the Lord. There is nothing further he can do for himself. He finally says, “Lord, only you can get me out of this mess. Vindicate me and plead my cause against an ungodly nation. Rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. You are my God, my stronghold, why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy.”

Lord, if I’m ever to come out of this, you’ve got to do it. You’ve got to help me. Then in turning his case over to God he sets his eyes toward the future. “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. There I will go to the altar of God.” He’s now seeing himself to finally getting back to worshipping the Lord in public. “My joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp.”

Having turned to God, now instead of looking at the future as some bleak and dark experience says, Lord you’re going to put a ray of light in that future and it’s not all coming to an end.

I found a great strategy the enemy works on our minds. When we are going through depression or any kind of struggle in our life the enemy’s plan is to give us the darkest scenario possible, to so fill our minds with defeat and discouragement that we see absolutely no hope at all and everything really this time is going to come unglued. The enemy tries to get us to assume the attitude, there is no hope. The enemy tries to get us to say, You’ll fail again. You’re trapped. The circumstances you have in life, the choices you have made, the environment you have made

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

for yourself or made for you, all that is working against you. There will never be anything for you but to be locked in to the terrible pattern that you are.

The psalmist lifts our heart and faith to the Lord and then to the future and says, The Lord makes all things new.

A real parallel passage to this psalm is the experience of Elijah. 1 kings 19. After having the victorious encounter on Mt. Carmel. Elijah in his contest with the prophets of Baal selected Mt. Carmel to have the contest because everywhere in northern Israel you can see it. People watching from 20-30 miles away can see the fire fall.

God had met with Elijah and had sent the fire. But then Jezebel threatened Elijah and he became frightened. He fled and went all the way down to Beersheba. From Carmel to Beersheba is this kind of a distance – 80 miles to Jerusalem and to Beersheba another 100-120 miles. Two hundred miles to get to Beersheba where Elijah finally ran out of gas and the Lord had to feed him. Then after that he went for 40 days and nights till he came to the bottom of Sinai, Mt. Horeb. That is one long trek. Just taking enough water with you would break your back because the oasis are far apart and ragged.

By the time Elijah is through running from Jezebel he has covered on foot well over 400 miles. No wonder he is exhausted and says to God in a state of depression, “Everybody else has forsaken you and only I am left.” Why has he been afraid? Why has he been depressed? Because he knows that God has been in his past but he has no confidence that God is going to be in his future. He knows that God has just done a great miracle for him but he cannot see that if God did it once he can do it again.

I suppose this always happens to us when we are in depression. We see the future as closed in on us. Sure the Lord answered prayers before but this time is different. This time things are really going to turn out bad. And everything is going to unwind – just wait and see.

Elijah felt that way. The Lord had to get him out of his cave. He hid in a cave. The Lord blew the wind, shook the ground with a quake and came with fire and then finally coaxed Elijah out of the cave with a still small voice.

The Lord calls us to the future. In the book of Hebrews the Lord lets us know that “Christ, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.” In Gethsemane in prays because he tells his disciples, “My soul is girded about with sorrows.” The word is so strong in the original language. But Hebrews says “For the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” How can he endure the sorrow? Because he knew that the sorrow was not the end. Golgotha was not the end. The cross was not the end. The resurrection was coming. He calls us to share in his faith.

Yesterday he died for me, today he lives for me, tomorrow he comes for me. Our whole history as God’s people is divided into those three ways. We look to the future. We know from Romans 5:3 that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame. Why is it therefore that we rejoice in our sufferings? Because we know that God is working a process through in our life and that first step in that process is suffering, depression, hardship. And that’s making us the kind of person we are – character. And that’s producing in us, hope. Because as we work through the process we always find that God is there.

A PSALM FOR THE DEPRESSED

Peter reminds us in 2 Peter 1:4 that we have exceeding great and precious promises. John reminds us in 1 John 2:25 that he has promised us eternal life.

So the psalmist sets his mind to the future. He knows that one of the great things to defeat depression is to begin to sing again. To listen to songs, to whistle, to open one's life in a musical way to God. "I will sing again. I will praise the Lord with my harp." So this time he asks once more the question "Why are you downcast O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" Now he knows. The previous two times he said it, it was almost like a whisper, with no confidence. "Put your hope in God."

Sometimes that advice seems so limp. A person comes to me as pastor and I say, Just trust in the Lord. I know the person has wanted something meatier than that. "You mean there's nothing else I can do? You mean the situation is that bad?"

That's exactly the process that the psalmist works himself through. By the time he gets to the end of the psalm he's declaring with full and strong voice: put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. I know now that you can trust the Lord and he will bring you through.

Lord we take that then for our own life, to put our trust in you. Only the Holy Spirit knows for whom this message is most intended. Who most is in that slew of despond, that cavern of darkness so deep that it admits no light. You're saying to us when we feel like the future is closing in and there's not really much positive things ahead, you're saying put your hope in God. By that you're telling us to not rely upon our own resources or ingenuity to work a difficult situation out. But you're telling us to renew our confidence in you. In following you we know that the Christian life begins with conversion and is followed by many conversions along the route where we adjust and readjust our understanding with you. When the disciples began following you they knew you in one way. But after three years with you, they know you in a fuller way. So our adversities bring us into depths in you and a new evaluation of how much you mean to us and how we do not stand in our own strength. How desperately we must trust in you because there's absolutely nothing that we can do to change the circumstances we find ourselves in. If our hope is not in you then we are truly cast down in soul. But we will yet trust you. We will offer to you in this time of difficulty our faith. We will believe in you even when our emotions are telling us that you have abandoned us. Even when we feel trauma in our life and agony. We will trust in you. And we will yet praise you, we will yet sing of you. We will know you in fresh ways as our Savior and our God. Thank you for your word which comes to bind up our brokenness, to make us whole. We thank you. In the Lord's name. Amen.