

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 and⁶ 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.*

Is Your Soul Downcast?

What is the hardest time of life? Many people would say that the teenage years are the toughest. According to a government health website, one in four teenagers has at least mild symptoms of depression. Teen suicide rates have been a concern for years. Yet, in recent years, the suicide rate for the elderly has surpassed that of teenagers. That says something about how hard life can get when you lose mobility and the power to make decisions for yourself and you feel lonely. If you think about it, some of those things are similar to what make the teenage years hard. Loneliness and feeling like other people are making decisions for you probably do contribute to teenage depression. And that should give us a perspective on the rest of life, too. Do we ever like it when other people are make our decisions for us? Conversely, do we struggle with tough decisions? Do we feel lonely and unloved? Any time in our life can be hard. Whatever turns out to be the toughest time of your life, we can only deal with the problems you're facing today. So how are you doing? To put it in the terms of our psalms for this morning, **is your soul downcast?**

I.

Do you feel forgotten by God? The two psalms we have before us today were written by one of “the Sons of Korah.” The Sons of Korah were a family of Levites who assisted with the temple worship in Jerusalem. These psalms form a kind of dialogue that a believer has with himself. On the one hand, he recites the things that make him feel bad. On the other, he keeps telling himself to trust in God. Along the way, he expresses things that we may not expect to find in the Bible. One of the striking things about God’s Word is how honest it is. In the Bible, there are no superheroes. The heroes of faith all have flaws because they’re all sinners. Sometimes in the psalms, a believer questions God’s care for him because the psalms show us the honest prayers of Christians struggling with life as it really is.

This dialogue begins with longing for God. The psalmist says, “**As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.**” Being thirsty is an unpleasant sensation. God designed our bodies to tell us when we’re getting dehydrated and they do it in a way that’s hard to ignore. The longer it goes on, the more your throat burns and the dryer your mouth is. Spiritually, we thirst for God. We need to know our Savior. We need to experience his love. We know and experience that love by hearing his word. But the writer of this psalm was cut off from God and his Word. It appears that he was about as far from Jerusalem as you can get and still be in Israel. He was way up north at Mt. Hermon. For the Jewish people, the temple in

Jerusalem was the one place on earth where they could make sacrifices to God. He had taught them that he was in the Most Holy Place above the Ark of the Covenant. So when they couldn't come to the temple, they felt cut off from him.

We don't experience our faith the same way today. And yet, we can feel cut off from God. As your pastor, every month I visit members whose health keeps them from coming to church. Some of those people desperately miss it. They would love to be here. They probably understand what this psalmist was talking about. He remembered when he would lead the processions into the temple. Many of our members think back on days when they could come here, on the people they sat with and talked to, on how comforting it was to hear the word of God here. They miss that. And it isn't only elderly people who experience that. When I was in the army, I was never stationed close to a church of our fellowship. For two years in Germany, I had to take a two hour train ride each way to get to church a couple of times a month, and I counted myself lucky that I was that close. During the months when I couldn't go, I missed coming and hearing the Word of God.

But sometimes, it isn't missing out on church that causes us to feel isolated from God. It's hurt that's happening in our lives. It's not clear what exactly was going on in this man's life. But it is clear that there were people who enjoyed his misery. Twice, he points out that his enemies loved to ask him, **"Where is your God?"** That has not changed. I remember a faithful Christian woman telling me about her husband who left her for another woman. When he saw how deeply this hurt her, he taunted her with that same question, "Where is your God?" Anyone who has seen our faith and heard our witness and not believed, might throw that faith up to us in the same way. Don't we tell our children that God loves us and he does all things for our good? Don't we tell friends and family and co-workers that we trust that God hears our prayers and takes care of us? Then something tragic happens and our hearts are broken. And unbelievers who resented our certainty throw all that testimony back in our face. "Where is your God? If he really loved you, would he let this happen to you?"

That hurts. It could lead us to question God and his promises. We hate to admit we do that and we feel guilty about it, because we know that it's a sin to question God. And if I had a perfect trust in God, I would take refuge in his promises and be at peace even when life hurts. But my faith will never be perfect on this side of heaven. When we hurt and we cry out to God for relief and we don't see it come, we may ask God, "Why?" The psalmist did. He said, **"Why have you forgotten me? ... Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"**

Of course, there's an accusation in those questions: God you're not taking good care of me. In the moment we ask those questions, the devil sees his opportunity to steal our faith. But God put those questions in our Bible – and this is not the only time we see questions like this, especially in the book of Psalms. God included them to show us that in the moment of hurt and weakness and questioning, we still have a seed of faith. That seed of faith still turns to God in hope. Before those questions, the psalmist called God his rock and his stronghold. We Lutherans might call him our Mighty Fortress. He still believed, even while he was struggling. In a sinful world, we are going to struggle sometimes. We are going to find it hard sometimes to cling to faith. At one and the same time, we're going to call God our Mighty Fortress and we're also wondering why he doesn't answer our prayers. That does not mean that we've lost our faith. It means that our faith is under attack by the unbeliever in our soul. But the believer is hanging on to God and his promises.

If that were not true, the struggle would be over. If your faith were truly dead, the most you would feel would be anger at the time you wasted being here. Your soul would not thirst for God and his love. You would not want your pastor to come and comfort you with the gospel. You would not worry about why God didn't answer your prayers, because you wouldn't believe he was there anymore. So the struggle itself means that your faith is still alive.

II.

Put your hope in God. That's where you find the comfort and the strength to face what hurts in this life. The psalmist does not only ask God a "why question." He asks himself a "why question." Three times in these two psalms, he asks, **"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?"** Each time, he points himself to the answer: **"Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."** Why do we praise God? Because we know his love and his promises. **Is your soul downcast? Do you praise your Savior and your God?**

This question that this believer asks himself over and over again is more than him telling himself to just buck up. This is the believer reminding himself of God's love. We don't have really any reason to despair.

Christ has done everything for us. He died and he rose to take our sins away. He promises that we will live with him forever, in a new and perfect world. He promises to be with us every day of our lives here, to hear and answer every one of our prayers, to give us strength, to care for us, to only send those things into our lives which work for our good. But in this sinful world, we constantly need to remember that truth. Part of life here is hurt. That includes feeling downcast when it feels like God isn't answering our prayers. So this believer keeps reminding himself to trust in God.

My friends, don't wallow in depression. That's hard to avoid when you feel down and depressed. It's my experience that when we feel bad, we often refuse to do the simplest things that would help. We don't go to our pastor for counsel or guidance. We don't go to church to hear the good news about Jesus. We don't even go outside and exercise or get fresh air or do any of the positive things that help us fight off those feelings. Instead, we wallow in depression and despair and we keep on reminding ourselves just how bad it all is. When life hurts, we need to remind ourselves of God's love. We will yet praise our Savior and our God. Life isn't always going to hurt. God does hear our prayers and many times, he does provide solutions to our hurts even here. God does heal us and strengthen us, or God calls us home to heaven where we stand before him in perfect joy and praise his name forever. God has not forgotten you, just because life hurts right now.

The psalmist prays, **“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.”** The light and the truth are the gospel of Jesus Christ. The amazing thing about Jesus is how he put himself in our place. He suffered what we suffer here. So even though his faith was perfect, he still had to feel our pain, because our faith is not perfect. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, **“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”** He was actually echoing the Greek translation of this verse. He knew what it felt like to be driven into the dust by the hurt that sin causes us here. Jesus knew what it was like to have his enemies taunt him and ask him where his God was. On the cross, they mocked him and said, **“He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him.”** Later, he cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** That was more than just feeling like God had left him. God really had abandoned him to the horrors of hell because that's what our sins deserve.

When we feel like God is not listening to us, we're feeling a tiny taste of what hell will be like forever. Because of Jesus' love, that tiny taste is all we'll ever feel. Jesus endured the pain of this life, he endured death and hell, to rescue us from death and hell and the pain of this life. The best cure for being downcast over how much life hurts and how unfair it all is and how little it seems like God is listening to us is to return to the Garden of Gethsemane and see our Savior suffer our hurt. It's to return to the cross and see him take on the full measure of what it means to be a suffering sinner for us. It's to go to the empty tomb and hear the angels say, “He is not here. He has risen.” That suffering and conquering Christ did all that to free you and me from the hurt and sorrow of this life and of the life to come.

God comes with healing in in that gospel message. God hears and answers all our prayers, even if we have to wait and see what his answer is going to be. His apparent silence does not mean he did not hear. It's merely a call for patience. God gives us strength through the message of Jesus' love for us. Our Savior carries us through every hurt and sorrow of this life. He will carry us home to heaven. He will return and raise us from the dead. And the day will come when we will live in a perfect world, without pain or sorrow or sin forever. Until that day comes, cling to the promise. Is your soul downcast? Put your hope in God and praise him for his love. When you do that, it reminds you of all that he has done for you. Let us praise our Savior and our God in the words of Psalms 42 and 43.