The upward journey from despair to hope

Text: Psalms 42 & 43

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**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 1:3-9; Psalms 42 and 43

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 362, 169, 42, 43, 480

Series: Occasional

Theme: In the loneliness, suffering and despair of his isolation, the psalmists faith was tested but prevailed in hope.

Proposition: Brother and sisters in Christ, remind yourself to hope in the Lord because you will praise Him who is your salvation again.

**Introduction**

When anger is expressed outwardly the result is often hostile aggression which may lead to violence. When anger turns inwards the result may be excessive self-criticism, low self-esteem, despair and depression. There’s an ancient piece of writing which has been discovered from the 2nd millennium BC (that’s 3,000-4,000 years old!). It is entitled ‘dispute over suicide’ and contains a dialogue between a man and his own soul. In it, the writer suggests to his soul that the miseries of life are so great that taking his own life is an attractive solution. However, his soul has an equally gloomy view of death and doesn’t see suicide as a fix for the problem of suffering. This ancient text (or at least the part which has survived) contains no solution to the problem, but it does show that despair and depression are nothing new and that they destroy a positive, outward view of life and turn a person harmfully in upon themselves.

Psalms 42 and 43 also contain a dialogue of lament between a person and their own soul, but they also show the way out from despair to hope. These two psalms were almost certainly once a single psalm. You can see this by the repeating refrain in Psalm 42 verses 5 and 11 and in Psalm 43 verse 5: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God*”. It is also worth noting that a number of ancient Hebrew manuscripts combine these two psalms into one. They may have been separated in the past for the purposes of singing them in communal worship by Old Testament Israel. We’re going to look at these two psalms as a whole under three headings:

1. Thirsting for God’s presence
2. Drowning in suffering
3. Buoyed up by hope in the Lord
4. **Thirsting for God’s presence**

This psalm starts with the arresting simile of a panting deer. “*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God*” (Ps 42:1). This is an image of a hunted deer. One with hot steaming flanks, uplifted head, palpitating heart, rolling eyes, snorting nostrils, glaring eyes, and a thrust-out heated tongue. This animal is a state of need which affects the whole of its being. It is panting for the water brooks. Cool rippling streams with refreshing pools. By crossing a flowing stream, the deer’s scent trail is broken – there is greater safety on the other side. Why the image here of a deer and not a camel? A deer does not carry own large water reservoir, it has limited inward resources. The deer is not self-sufficient after being hunted on hot day, drained of moisture.

Our souls are like this, apart from God we die, just as our bodies do with no water. We can tire quickly in pursuit of a godly, faithful, Christian life. Pursued by our ‘sworn enemies’ – the devil, the world and our own flesh (HCLD52). When under spiritual stress we rapidly exhaust our own resources. The believer’s soul thirsts not for wealth, fame status or material comfort but for God. This thirsting/deep desiring is God’s gift to those who seek Him.

The psalmist yearns for God, as a deer does for fresh flowing water. As he does, he sheds bitter tears of longing and remembrance. He thinks back to times past when he went to worship the Lord in the Temple, together with the gathered covenant community there (Ps 42:4; 43:3-4). The annual pilgrimages of the Israelites to the Passover, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles were joyful times of praise, fellowship and blessing when ‘the tribes of the Lord’ went up to Jerusalem ‘to give thanks to the name of the Lord’ (Psalm 122:4).

We don’t know the precise circumstances of the psalmist, but he is clearly away from Jerusalem, perhaps in exile. The geographical references in 42 v6 may suggest this. He seems to be writing from the area to the north of Israel where the Jordan river has its’ source near Mount Herman. The location of Mount Mizar (which in Hebrew means ‘little mountain’) is unknown. His state of sorrow is certainly similar to that of the exiles in Babylon as expressed in Psalm 137:1 “*there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion*”. The living, flowing water which the panting deer seeks after mirrors the living God in whose presence the psalmist longs to be.

How many Christian brothers and sisters of our around the world long to meet together in a local church fellowship but are unable to do so due to COVID-19 related restrictions, oppressive governments, or ill-health? A number of our own church members are no longer able to come and gather with us to give thanks to the name of the Lord. Such isolation can result in the despair of a down cast soul who feels deserted by their Lord.

Have you ever had a ‘conversation with yourself’ in your head? Secular psychologists recognise the powerful phenomenon of the ‘internal monologue, also called ‘self-talk’, ‘inner speech’ or ‘the internal narrative’. Christian author ‘Joe Thorn’ has recognised the value of preaching the gospel to ourselves’ in his small book ‘note to self’.

This is what the psalmist does in verse 5 as he thirsts for God’s presence in the midst of his despair, asking himself: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation*” The psalmist longs for God like a deer for fresh water, but he feels like he is drowning in his suffering, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Drowning in Suffering**

Water is essential for life, whether you are a deer, or a human being made in God’s image. Too much water however can be life-threatening and very destructive, as it was at the time of the global flood when God rescued Noah and his family in the ark. As the psalmist despairs of his isolation from God in the ‘land of Jordan’ he thinks of the turbulent waters of this river as though he were drowning in them. “*Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me*” (42:7). These are not refreshing waters, but chaotic, dangerous forces. The psalmist feels like Jonah did in the belly of the fish “*I am driven away from your sight…The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me*” (Jonah 2:4-5). These are frightening images of drowning in suffering.

The psalmist despairs because he feels like he is under God’s judgement, and not experiencing His fatherly protection. He cries out to the Lord, his rock: *"Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"* (Ps 42:9-10). The presence of enemies can increase the experience of loneliness apart from God and His people. The pain and despair of the psalmist is amplified by the taunts of his enemies who continually say to him ‘*where is your God?*’ (42:3).

He is deeply sad because of the persecution by his enemies, asking the Lord ‘*Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy*’ (43:2). He feels that the Lord in whom he had taken refuge has rejected him (43:2). He doubts God’s willingness to rescue him. Such feelings cast down the soul and lead to what the late pastor and author Dr Martyn-Lloyd Jones, has termed ‘spiritual depression’.

Remember when Christ was derided by those who passed by Him at Calvary ‘*save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*’ (Matt 27:40). Jesus did not just feel like His Heavenly Father had abandoned Him on the cross, Christ was truly alone there as He cried out: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matt 27:46). Is the language of ‘drowning in suffering’ too strong to describe Christ on the cross, or Christ at Gethsemane who said there: “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*” (Matt 26:38)?

Jesus said to His disciples, He says to us brothers and sisters: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matt 16:24). The Christian life has been described as a continual climb, a “path of conflict and struggle”. Many of the psalms of lament – passionate expressions of grief and sorrow -testify to this reality. These psalms are a comfort to the afflicted believer because:

* They remind us that suffering is ‘normal’ in an ‘abnormal’ world which is no longer very good, but has been ‘*subjected to futility*’ (Rom 8:20). It is no longer able to be what God originally created it to be: a pain-free paradise in which isolation and suffering would be absent.
* They remind us that we are not alone in our suffering, despair and/or depression. Many of the Lord’s children have endured great pain of soul, great opposition from their enemies and a feeling of being deserted by their God.
* They remind us that Christ suffered all the pains expressed in psalms like 42 and 43. If the perfect man experienced such suffering whilst living a holy life on this earth should we. the willing followers of Christ, be surprised if we too suffer?

Psalms 42 and 43 are also a comfort and an encouragement to us because they teach us the value of ‘preaching the gospel to ourselves’ as we engage in godly self-talk like the psalmist does again in verse 11: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation*”. As faith finds expression in the promises of God remembered, hope rises in the troubled soul, which brings us to our final point:

1. **Buoyed up by hope in the Lord**

If you are being submerged below the surface of stormy water what you desperately need is to be brought back up again. To be kept afloat is to be buoyed up. This is what hope does in the human soul. It lifts up.

We are used to finding the main point in a piece of writing at the end; like the punchline of a joke or the summary in an essay which pulls together the whole piece and expresses the main idea in a few words. The Hebrew language of Scripture often doesn’t work this way. The central idea is frequently found in the middle (a chiasm), not at the finish. You can see this for example in the book of Lamentations, a sad lament about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians at the time of the prophet Jeremiah. The main point is not at the end of this book, but in the middle: “*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him.*" (Lam 3;21-24).

The central ‘take home’ message of the book of Lamentations is hope in the Lord, just as it is in psalms 42 and 43. The middle of what was originally one psalm is 42 verse 8: “*By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life*”. In the midst of his despair and self-doubt, the suffering psalmist remembers the faithful covenant love of the Lord. The constant, never-failing love of God has never ceased, it just feels like it has to him in the pain of his present circumstances.

It may feel to you as though the Lord is very far from you at the moment. You may yearn for the experience of spiritual vitality and confidence that you once knew. You may feel isolated from God and from His people. You may despair of your situation in life. You may be overwhelmed by troubles. Perhaps you are under intense attack from the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12). Perhaps you are persecuted by enemies in the unbelieving world who seek to bring you down. Perhaps you are feeling lonely and isolated, both from God and from your church family.

Perhaps you are taunted and troubled by your own sinful flesh. The Apostle Paul knew this suffering. He did not understand his own actions, revealing his personal struggles in these words ‘*for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*’ (Rom 7:15).

In this life there are times when we all need to be buoyed up by a reminder of the steadfast love of God who will certainly bring to completion the good work which He has begun in His children (Phil 1:6). We can trace the upward journey of the psalmist from despair to hope and see revealed in this a pathway for us to follow too.

In psalm 43 the internal dialogue of lament changes to a direct conversation with God in prayer. It is a prayer for God to act, to judge and to deliver. “*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!*”. The psalmist is not trying to ‘float his own boat’, but is calling upon the Lord as his Saviour to come to his rescue. As He relies upon the Lord, confidence in the future returns: “*Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God*” (Psalm 32:3-4).

The psalmist is a man of faith who thirsts for the presence of God, who has been drowning in his suffering, but who is now buoyed up by hope in the Lord. His hope was in the promises of God as yet unfulfilled. He had seen these promises ‘from afar’, not having as yet received them (Heb 11:13). He did not know that His salvation was through the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on his behalf. He did not know that Christ would suffer more than he ever would and that in Jesus, he would have a sympathetic High Priest. He did not know that ultimately, he would ‘go with the throng’ to the house of God which will be the New Jerusalem. We know these revealed truths, but like the psalmist we see the future promises of God by faith ‘from afar...not having as yet received them.

Psalms 42 and 43 end with the final repeated refrain: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation*”. Here he is preaching to himself again. Preaching a message of hope. Preaching the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, whatever your life situation now and at any time in the future, Preach Christ to yourself. Preach the truth to your soul. Make the internal narrative of your mind the story of the steadfast love of the Lord. In the midst of suffering when you feel like you are drowning, when it seems like God has abandoned you, when your ‘sworn enemies’– the devil, the world and your own flesh fiercely pursue you: remember that the faithful love of God never fails and that there is an upward pathway from despair to hope in Christ. Nothing and nobody will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39b).

Here’s the main idea of psalms 42 and 43 again: “*By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life*”.

AMEN.