

In the early 2000's I had the opportunity to go on multiple mission trips to Chiang Mai Thailand. On one of those trips, we sent to serve at a leper colony. Honestly y'all, I knew very little about leprosy except for Bible references. So I expected to see people with major skin problems. Most of the people I saw had normal looking skin. But most of them had lost fingers and toes and even more sections of limbs. What I learned while I was there was that leprosy is so much more than a skin disease. It actually affects peripheral nerves and causes the loss of feeling. This leads to injuries that go unattended and ultimately result in greater infection and eventually amputation. I hadn't given it much thought, but suddenly realized that being able to feel when you are hurt or injured is a good thing. Pain leads me to pay attention to where I'm hurting and seek healing, not just relief.

Did you know that's true spiritually and emotionally? Feelings are like the warning lights on your dashboard. The objective is not just to make the warning light go out, but to deal with the issue. Feelings don't need to be ignored, they should be investigated. They don't need to be covered or masked, they are telling us that something needs attention. And that should move us to action. Today, we're going to talk about those seasons when you are spiritually depressed. I know that depression is a complicated thing, and I'm not suggesting that all depression is primarily spiritual. I'm talking about those seasons when you haven't lost your faith, but you just can't seem to feel God. You don't hear Him speaking. He feels distant and you are just confused by what He's doing or not doing. Psalm 42 is a haunting picture of what it feels like to be struggling spiritually. But it's not just a description, it also gives us a prescription. We're going to walk through Psalm 42 and consider 2 things: 1. what spiritual drought, darkness, & depression feel like. 2, what we should do about it.

What spiritual drought, darkness, depression feel like:

Psalm 42 shows us that the struggle is real. Look at verse 1.

¹As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

Ever sung "as the deer pants for the water...?" So sweet and peaceful. Wrong idea. This is not a precious little deer in a peaceful green meadow sauntering up to a babbling brook to lap up cool refreshing water on a warm sunny day. The picture here is a deer, on the run, dying of thirst but unable to find a stream to drink from. It's an intense and frantic search for water. The Psalmist is distressed and desperate for God but can't seem to find Him.

³My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"

He can't stop crying. Ever been there? And it seems he's not eating, because he says my only food has been my tears. And the outside world notices that things are bad and asks "where is your God?" It looks to them as though he has been abandoned by God. It's not just an internal struggle. It's obvious to everyone.

⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

⁶My soul is downcast within me;

He's in the depths and it feels like a never-ending downward spiral. He's downcast, depressed.

⁷Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

He is overwhelmed, as if he is drowning, gasping for air. The storm is too much for him. Why isn't God calming the winds and the waves?

⁹ I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

He feels forgotten and left defenseless as his enemies oppress him. Seems like God isn't protecting him.

¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

He's suffering physically from what feels like a fatal disease. And here again, his foes add insult to injury, claiming it as evidence that God has abandoned him.

That's rough. But you know what? This is not an uncommon experience for the people of God. There will be times of darkness, seasons of drought. There will be loss and grief, times of deep hurt and feelings of depression. And if you haven't been there yet, you will be. Trust me, no one is exempt. But this Psalm teaches us what to do. 7 ways to respond. 7 ways to encourage ourselves and each other.

What we should do

1. Refine your desires

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?*

Listen to what he says: *My soul thirsts for God*. In seasons of want, you have to clarify your longings. What you think you want or need and what your soul really longs for may not be the same thing. In fact, I think it's safe to say they are most assuredly not the same. Can we be honest? I am allergic to pain. I have an

intolerance for difficulty. I'm pretty sure I was created for comfort and luxury. I am attracted to abundance and pleasure and peace. I want to be strong and sufficient. Truthfully, what I want is a life that is free of the need for God. But that's not what I was created for – I was created to know and love and rely on God. I was created for dependence not independence. But if I don't tell myself the truth about what my soul really longs for, then I will devise schemes that attempt to get for myself the idols that promise fulfillment but never deliver.

Some of y'all are running so hard after stuff and things and experiences and status and success and image and relationships and approval. And most of you should know by now, from the trail of disappointment and dissatisfaction behind you that none of that will satisfy. What you really need is to be with Jesus because “in his presence is fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore

Let me say one more thing before we move on from this – to refine your desires, doesn't just mean articulating a noble desire. By definition, refining is the exposure and removal of every impurity. And you know how that most often happens, fire. The heat causes the impurities to rise to the top and then they are discarded. You can't have a pure desire for God alongside every other desire. Love for the things of the world and love for Jesus can't coexist in your heart. Fix your eyes on Him, turn your heart toward Him, and refine your desires.

2. Remember the presence of 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.*

The Psalmist calls up time he gathered with the people of God, experienced the protection of God, and enjoyed being with God. These are not general memories of going to church. He's calling up specific remembrances of encounters with God at the temple. He's not forgotten when God showed up, when He spoke, when He moved in power. He has vivid memories of the manifest presence of God

Church, there are some moments that are etched in memory, times I saw God move, watched Him heal, heard Him speak. I'll never forget the Wednesday night that a young deaf UNC student named Covey Lathan was sitting in choir practice. She came because she wanted to feel the music and learn to sign the songs. All of a sudden she shrieked and ran out of the room. In an instant her hearing had been restored. I can't forget the Easter Sunday when I saw Joan Swain the first service with her unbelieving husband. I watched them come back in for the second service because Tommy wanted to hear the message again. God was moving and by the end of the morning he gave his life to Christ and was baptized. I'll never forget the first time I heard Pastor JD say "the Gospel isn't just the diving board off which we jumped into Christianity, it's the pool itself." And it was a moment of awakening – the Gospel isn't just the beginning of the Christian life, it is the Christian life. You need to experience and recall moments like that because they remind us that our God shows up and moves and works and speaks and saves, heals and delivers.

Listen when we gather, we should expect to experience God. We should be looking and listening for Him. You should approach church attendance like it's the most important thing in your week other than your personal time with God. you need to prepare yourself and show up regularly and on time. You need to engage in worship. You need to bring your Bible and notebook like you think God might actually say something to you that you don't want to

forget. You cannot afford to be ambivalent or indifferent to the opportunities you have to know God and celebrate Him along with the people of God. Trust me, there's coming a day when you're going to need to know when and how God has met with you.

3. Repeat truth to your self

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.*

Do you see what's happening here? He's questioning himself. He's examining his feeling and then speaking to his own soul. He's instructing his feelings. Surely you know by now that your feelings aren't always reliable. "Follow your heart" "Just do what feels right" is horrible advice. Your heart is deceitful and more desperately wicked than you know.

Your feelings are real, but they may not be telling you the truth. They may very well need some attention and action, but probably not obedience. Just think about what the Psalmist felt that was not true. He felt abandoned, but the truth was that God was present and listening. He felt like he would be swept away and destroyed but the truth was that God was His Rock. He felt like God was against him, but the truth was that God loved him and was for him. Imagine what kind of mess he would have been in if he hadn't known the truth?

This is one of the primary reasons that you need to spend regular time in God's Word. And I'm not talking about 5 minutes of causal reading in the morning. I'm talking about soaking in it, saturating your mind and heart with it. Meditating on it, memorizing it. Satan is a Liar, he attacks your heart with lies about the character

and purposes of God. Often those lies come in the form of feelings. And if you are going to be able to navigate those lies, you better be armed and ready to speak Truth to yourself, the very Word of God.

4. Reaffirm the Sovereignty of God

*⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers have swept over me.*

Don't miss this, he acknowledges that what is happening is under the Sovereign rule of God. "All **YOUR** waves and breakers have swept over me." He says: God, this is from your hand. They are your waves and breakers, they are subject to your command. The Psalmist acknowledges that God is involved in his troubles. Even in the storm, God is Sovereign.

The scriptures repeatedly affirm this grand truth.

Psalm 11:3-4

*3 When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?"*

*4 The Lord is in his holy temple;
the Lord is on his heavenly throne.*

Did you catch that? What's essential when everything is caving in around us and the world seems to be falling apart is our awareness that our Good God is seated in the place of all authority and power – on His throne in heaven. The Sovereignty of God is a glorious doctrine that should bring us immeasurable hope and peace. Don't you dare let go of this. Even in chaos and pain and confusion, God is still firmly on the throne, faithfully working all things together to conform me to the image of his son and will one day present me before his glorious presence, faultless and with great joy.

5. Recall the love of God

*⁸ By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.*

Even in the midst of great darkness, battling depression and discouragement, he still recognizes the love of God directed toward him. At night he sings of that love and turns that song into a prayer. You need to hang onto God's great love for you and there's no clearer demonstration of that than in the Gospel. Romans 5:8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* You better drive this stake deep into your heart, so that when the winds of trouble blow, you won't be destroyed. God's great demonstration of his love for you is not and never will be your circumstances. Christians in Ukraine, in Afghanistan, in North Korea, and India and Iran and Somalia and Nigeria – all of them tonight can be confident and sing of God's great love for them, they can pray knowing they are beloved children of God, in the face of great persecution and in spite of their horrific circumstances. Can you do that? Listen to me – the measure of God's love for you is not your temporary condition. And confidence in God's love for you has nothing to do with how you feel. Your feelings don't negate the love of God.

Listen to the writer of Lamentations.

Lamentations 3:19-23

*¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall. **Remember=call to mind/aware***

²⁰ I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹ Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

*²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

²³ They are new every morning ;great is your faithfulness.

Be aware of your affliction, but be more aware of a greater and more necessary reality – You have been loved with an everlasting love and your Father has drawn you with His lovingkindness.

6. Remain in prayer

⁹ *I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”*

I love this. He has not lost sight of who God is to Him and he has not stopped praying. “I say to God my Rock” No matter how dark and depressing, He still calls God his ROCK. Solid, reliable, the foundation for life. And He’s asking questions. “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” He is still pursuing relationship, wanting to understand God’s purposes, believing in God’s activity in his life.

I’m absolutely amazed that at no point in this entire Psalm does he ask God to change his circumstance. He doesn’t cry out for God to silence or defeat his enemies. There’s no request for removal of the physical suffering. His plea is for the presence of God, because He trusts His God.

If God never changes your circumstance or brings relief for your suffering, but you get before Him and know that He has heard your cry, that is enough. Because the primary purpose of prayer is not to get something from God, but rather to get to God. And more than you and I need what God can do for us, we need who God is.

7. Reset your hope

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.*

The Psalm ends with a declaration of hope - *Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.* He doesn’t seem to know when, but he expects that there is coming a day when he will praise the One who is His Savior and His God. He is choosing to set his hope on the promises of God. He deliberately chooses future hope instead of resigning himself to present despair.

Sign in our neighborhood – It will get better

I know that most of want to believe that things will get better, but we don’t have that guarantee. But nothing in Scripture promises us earthly comfort and ease and pleasure. In fact, if you read The Book, it pretty much tells you it’s all going from bad to worse. Jesus said, in this world you WILL have trouble. But take heart (have hope) I have overcome the world.

The Word of God repeatedly tells us to set our minds on things above, to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven not on earth. I’m not called to put my hope in the temporary but in the eternal. We have a greater hope that is beyond this life. Paul expressed it in Philippians 1:20-21 *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* Yall, that kind of hope takes deliberate, intentional, daily setting our minds and hearts on things above not on earthly things. You have to make sure you haven’t set your heart on the wrong thing.

One final observation. The heading of the Psalm tells us something important about the significance of this Psalm for the gathered church. Look at it. **For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.** Everything about this heading indicates that it was written for use in public worship – *For the director of music*, obvious. *A maskil*, a poem or song for instruction. And *of the Sons of Korah* they were a group of priests whose ministry was singing in the Temple worship. This Psalm was intended not for private meditation but for public worship. They sang this in the temple because it represented a common experience not an isolated incident. “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man” Here’s what that means for us. is. Dealing with spiritual drought, darkness and depression is not a solo endeavor. We have to face this together. And we need to sing in ways that stir Gospel hope up in each other.

When darkness seems to hide his face,
I rest on his unchanging grace,
in every high and stormy gale,
my anchor holds within the veil”

When peace like a river, attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul

I count on one thing The same God that never fails
Will not fail me now You won't fail me now
In the waiting The same God who's never late
Is working all things out You're working all things out
Yes I will, lift You high in the lowest valley
Yes I will, bless Your name
Oh, yes I will, sing for joy when my heart is heavy
All my days, oh yes I will