
When life is hard and God seems...far away

Psalms 42-43

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Introduction

It seemed too good to be true. As an Iowan boy I dreamt of the Rocky Mts. But never had been there until my Sophomore year in High School. With one of my best friend's family we set out in the dark of the morning to make our way to the Mts. Weaving through the cornstalks of Iowa and driving through the dreadful humidity of Missouri we made it to the highway of Kansas. And on and on we went – down the strait, flat, endless, road of Kansas to the Great Mts. of Colorado. I found myself a bit confused by Dorothy's sentiment – “there is no place like home”...in Kansas?

After seemingly days of driving my eyes began to dance. Slowly rising out from the horizon there they were. The Rocky Mountains stretching more than 3,000 miles from the northernmost part of British Columbia down to New Mexico. Extending upward to caress the sky at an elevation of 14,500 feet above sea level, this mountain range took my breath away. I could hardly wait to get out of the car and smell sweet air and walk on beauty. What happened next was not anticipated.

After an hour or so of driving I asked the well-known question, “Are we there yet”? I could still see the mountain range but it didn't seem like it was getting any bigger; you know, closer. Then they gave me the news. “Dan, we will see magnificence of the mountains for hours before we actually touch the magnificence of the mountains”.

So we stayed the course, rolling down the strait, flat, seemingly endless road of eastern Colorado until we made it to our destination.

When I look at this scene in my mind, it reminds me of the Christian walk. Having been given sight of the majesty of Christ from afar we walk together by faith enjoying the grace-given glimpses of His glory. But, we keep walking by faith, putting our hope in him through all the difficulties, all the troubles, all the sadness, all the fears – until uninterruptedly we see him face to face forevermore. Then we will smell sweet air. Then we will walk with Beauty!

Introduction to series

We are starting a 3-message series called “When life is hard and God seems...”. The first message (this morning) is titled “When life is hard and God seems far away”. Tonight we will look into the book of Isaiah and notice “When life is hard and God seems slow”. Next week we will make our way to Matthew 20 and notice “when life is hard and God seems unfair”.

We bring this series to you in order that we together will journey in our walk of faith well. That we will endure to the end and enjoy endless pleasure in His presence is the goal of this series.

Let's get started with our first message found in Psalms 42-43. Please take out your Bibles and open them with me to Psalms 42-43 where we will finish the sentence, “when life is hard and God seems far away”.

<pray>

From sadness to song / from downcast to delight; and this without any change in circumstance we come to Psalms 42-43. Together these two psalms form a lament and a plea for vindication from oppression by enemies. They together rehearse the joys of temple worship and the longing to experience it once again. It starts in tears and ends in joy. The change we will notice is not in circumstances but it is in the Psalmist.

The Three Movements

The writer questioning God and despairing of hope goes through the droughts (42:1-5) and depths (42:6-11) before he gets to his delight (43:1-5). Let's watch this movement...and then imitate!

The Droughts

v.1-5

First the droughts. Follow along as I read v1-5.

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.
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.

What it represents

v.1-2a

When life is hard and God seems far away what does it look/feel like? In v1-2a we see a deer in the midst of a drought panting for water. Living in a time and area in which there were no modern water systems the people of the Bible understood what it meant and what it felt like to be without water. Painful and perilous were real results of droughts. For example, in Exodus 17 the Israelites were rescued from Egypt and were led by Moses through the wilderness. Water was scarce. Their faith was weak. They said to Moses, “why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock *die of thirst*”. Acutely aware of the need for water were the people of the Bible.

The Psalmist in 42 uses panting and thirsting as a biblical image for something basic and essential in our lives. Do you see what that is? **The quest for fellowship with and satisfaction in the LORD is the basic desire of a genuine Christian.** It is like water to a dear dying of thirst (see Ps.36:8-9; 63:1; Isa. 55:1f; Matt.5:6; Jn.4:10-14; 7:37-39; Rev.21:6). The poet longs for this satisfaction in God but is not experiencing it.

Why he wants this

v.2b-5

Why does the Psalmist want this so badly? He tells the reader four reasons why satisfaction in God is crucial to him in v2b-5.

1. *When shall I come and appear before God? (v.2b)*

The writer of this psalm was a Levite whose primary responsibility was leading worship. As a Levite exiled among Gentiles, this Psalmist was **hindered** from leading groups of people to Jerusalem for a commemoration and celebration of the faithfulness of God. These festivals (held 3x per year) were his joy and delight. (cf. Ps. 84:7; also see Ex.23:14-17). He loved to worship the LORD. And this expressed itself in helping others do the same. The postponement of festival grieved his heart. He pants for God like a deer for waters because he can't be with God's people travelling together to Jerusalem for a festival.

2. *My tears while they say to me (v.3)*

Next we see in v3 that not only was he hindered from experiencing exceeding joy in God with a group of like-minded people, he was **harassed**. Enemies taunted him while he longed for corporate worship. The enemy wanted the psalmist to conclude something untrue – God is distant! God is gone! He had left His people to their own tears. Oh, when a soul rests on itself it sinks into despondency. In verse four we can feel the intensity of this pain.

3. *These things I remember (v.4)*

Read v4 again. Notice how happy he was. Notice what he wanted. Notice all the like-minded people around him. But this memory of former pleasure caused him fresh pain without a solution. Pining for the “good old days” for him was nothing more than unproductive **nostalgia**. As verse five shows he is downcast.

4. *Why are you downcast O my soul (v5)*

He is sinking into **depression** but not without a fight. He will not yield to such melancholy. Confronting and admonishing himself with truth was one of the Psalmist's strategies to fight unhappiness. The stubborn sadness does not break yet. He must go through more difficulty.

When life is hard and God seems far away what are we to think? What are we to want? What are we to do? Let's continue following our friend as he enters The Depths. Take a listen as I read for us v6-11.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
 and at night his song is with me,
 a prayer to the God of my life.
 I say to God, my 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 all the day long,
 “Where is your God?”
 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.

The Depths

v.6-11

To understand how his life was hard look at the descriptions of the “landscape” in this movement. First notice where the poet was when he remembered God.

Experiencing suffering

6

The land of Jordon, Herman and Mt. Mizar

These geographic markers are outside the land God promised his people. God’s people in the days of the sons of Korah were away from homeland and into foreign land. These landmarks are literary signs of danger and/or disobedience/discipline.

Deep, waterfalls, breakers, waves

Carried along by this poem we have come from the drought (v.1-5) into a threatening deluge (v.6) telling us that the Psalmist is in intense suffering (cf. 69:1-2; 88:7; see also Jonah 2:4). The term “Deep” is to remind readers of the chaotic, dark waters of creation back in Gen.1:2.

Threatening – intimidating – frightening – confusing – disorienting: these are the times in which the poet longs for God. Notice what the Psalmist does in the midst of this intense suffering.

My soul is cast down within me therefore... (v.6)

Remembering God was his way of bringing his soul up from the depths.

Remembering the LORD

7-11

He remembered that...

His sovereignty

1. Your, your, your (v.7)

all the suffering we ever undergo is ordered by the Lord (cf. Ps. 119:71; 135:6,7; see also Matt.14:22-33). Notice the pronouns of v7. He is sovereign over the psalmist's suffering. And that knowledge brings his soul up from the depths and leads him to v8; the fulcrum in the poem.

His steadfast love

2. The LORD (v. 8)

Here in v8 we find the turning point in these two Psalms as we observe a radical change in reference to God. 16x the writer uses the term God [in Hebrew: *Elohim*] in Psalms 42-43. This term communicates His raw power and sustaining strength. But it's not usually used to describe closeness and faithfulness. Now in v8 he changes the term to LORD [in Hebrew: *Yahweh*] and uses for the first time (and the only time) God's personal name; the name that stands for the one and only God who makes and keeps covenant with His people – His name is Yahweh – the faithful One who cares for His people. “Steadfast love” and “songs in the night” are evidence of who He is; namely Yahweh (all that I AM I AM to you). Remembering “Yahweh” begins the pull of the soul out from the slumber of hopelessness.

Though he is not in the Land, though the circumstances had not changed, though he still struggles with his faith (notice v.9-11) the LORD was now “my rock” (v.9); stable and strong and unchanging, the covenant-keeping, personally sustaining God of my salvation! (cf. 18:2; 31; 46; etc.).

The Delight

43:1-5

Profound heart changes occurred in the Psalmist are seen in 43:1-5. Though similar language may be found here (see the refrains of 42:5,11; 43:5) the tone is much different. A transition from lament (dominating Ps.42) to plea and then praise shows a different disposition. Listen up as I read Psalm 43 to you.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!

For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?
Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?

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.

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

We now come to requests from the Psalmist. In v.1-5 we hear him putting forth his prayer requests out of his hope in God.

Requests to God

1-3

1. Vindicate me (v.1)

This is a desire to be seen as innocent of the accusations from the Gentiles.

2. Deliver me (v.1)

This is a desire to be rescued from the droughts and floods of a fallen world.

3. Send out your light and your truth (v.3)

This is a desire for his original longing in 42:1 to be satisfied. The Lord must be the leader of this change. Otherwise there will be no change.

Results from God

4-5

4. Then I will go to the altar of God (v.4)

This is a desire for fresh application of grace and forgiveness. The altar was the place where the blood of the animal sacrifice was sprinkled to make atonement for the people. This is the place where God forgave the sins of his people. In other words, the light of God leads him to the truth of his sinfulness and takes him to the place of forgiveness.

5. To God my exceeding joy (4b)

This is a desire to experience the final goal of life. God himself experienced as our exceeding joy. The phrase “God, the gladness of my rejoicing (a literal translation)” tells the reader that the Psalmist has been granted his original desire of Ps.42:1. He is not physically in Jerusalem. He is not physically at the Temple. But he is finally with God as his gladness of all his joys. EXCEEDING JOY! And what is the result of all this? V5...

6. I will praise you (v.5)

When God is viewed not as distant but as delightful praise happens. Joy cannot keep quiet. Now the Psalmist can say what he has said throughout the two psalms (42:5, 11, 43:5) but this time there is confidence and joy.

To bring these psalms home to our hearts here are a few reflections and applications.

When life is hard and God seems far away...

- 1. Don't "feed" off of your grief (42:3).*
- 2. Remember the "good old days" are not necessarily the best days (42:4)*
- 3. Remembering God as He really is brings about a new beginning (42:6,8)*
- 4. Understanding the sovereignty of God over suffering assists (42:7)*
- 5. Don't listen to but rather speak to yourself in truth (42:5,11,43:5)*
- 6. Pray for "light and truth" to lead you spiritually to God (43:3)*
- 7. This coming to God will require a look at sin and the atonement –a look at Christ (43:4)*
- 8. Don't stop praying this way until Christ is your "exceeding joy" (43:4)*
- 9. Express this exceeding joy in the congregation of the faithful (43:4)*
- 10. And never forget that amid suffering HOPE IN GOD (43:5)*