

HOPE IN GOD
PSALM 42

John Bunyan is one of the most well-known believers in Christ. He wrote numerous books, including the still-in-print, *Pilgrim's Progress*. A bold pastor in a difficult time in the church, he was imprisoned for 12 years for preaching the gospel, yet he did not always exude confidence and fearlessness. Prior to his salvation he said,

“A whole flood of blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the Scriptures were poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment...My heart was at times exceeding hard. If I would have been given a thousand pounds for a tear, I could not shed one...Oh, the desperateness of man’s heart. . . . I feared that this wicked sin of mine might be that sin unpardonable...Oh, no one knows the terrors of those days but myself.” [Piper, *When the Darkness Will Not Lift*, 20.]

Call it discouragement, despondency, or depression, most people will experience it in some ways at some point in their lives — and for some it may become an almost debilitating battle.

Charles Spurgeon noted,

The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy. There may be here and there men of iron, to whom wear and tear work no perceptible detriment, but surely the rust frets even these; and as for ordinary men, the Lord knows, and makes them to know, that they are but dust. [“The Minister’s Fainting Fits”]

Discouragement hasn’t disappeared in our modern age, either. In his helpful biography, *The Roots of Endurance*, John Piper writes [79],

...one of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. It hangs in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We blame easily. We break easily. Our marriages break easily. Our faith breaks easily. Our happiness breaks easily. And our commitment to the church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition.

Where does discouragement come from and is there any hope for the discouraged believer? An unnamed psalmist opens his heart and soul to the discouragement of his own life in a way that provides both spiritual encouragement and spiritual direction for us.

Psalm 42 was given to a group of men called the Sons of Korah to lead in public worship. It appears that they did not write the song, but were to use the song in leading the singing of the Israelite congregants as they gathered to worship. We don’t know the author or his exact setting. At minimum, he is afflicted with an illness that is keeping him from worship. He may be living in the northern-most part of Israel and

cannot get to the Temple for regular worship. Or he (most likely) has been taken into captivity by an invading nation, like Assyria or Babylon, and is far removed from the land of Israel and from worship. He is alone and is being mocked and persecuted for his faith. The barrage of persecution has left him despondent and discouraged. To whom will he turn? That's the question he answers in this song:

EVEN IN THE PRESSURES OF LIFE, GOD IS GOD AND WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE.

As we turn to this psalm, notice also that the heading tells us it is a *Maskil*. The exact meaning of the term is uncertain but it seems to mean something like, "to be prudent, wise." Thus, it is a song that is written to give wisdom and instruction. Here is counsel about living wisely when life is hard, unfair, and uncertain.

1. The Laments of Hopelessness (vv. 1-4)

- "God is ABSENT" (vv. 1-2)
- "I am SUFFERING" (v. 3)
- "I have LOST worship and ministry" (v. 4)

2. God's Provision of Hope (v. 5)

- Be PATIENT as God works
- Continue in (or resume) PRAISE
- God is saving and will SAVE
- SPEAK to yourself

3. More Laments of Hopelessness (vv. 6-10)

- "Absence makes the heart grow DESPONDENT" (v. 6)
- "My trials are OVERWHELMING" (v. 7)
- "Has God not HEARD?" (vv. 8-9)
- "I am being PERSECUTED" (v. 10)

4. God's Final Provision of Hope (v. 11)

- Be PATIENT as God works
- God is MY God
- SPEAK to yourself

1. The Laments of Hopelessness (vv. 1-4)

• “God is ABSENT” (vv. 1-2)

- ✓ The first lament of the psalmist is probably the most significant lament he has — he feels alone and without the fellowship of God. He pictures that longing with the image of a thirsting *deer...*
- ✓ He is referring to the deer’s regular need for water and its passion and quest for daily water.
- ✓ Similarly, he has an ongoing need for God. And notice that he addresses God directly — *my soul pants for You...* He has an inward craving for God that cannot be satisfied by anything else. The deer needs water more than anything else and the psalmist needs God more than anything else. Addressing God directly might be an implication that the psalmist feels absent from God.
- ✓ In v. 2 the psalmist addresses other worshippers (not God), *my soul thirsts for God*. Here he sounds like David who was parched for God after a season of spiritual dryness (63:1).
- ✓ He doesn’t just yearn for God, but he longs for *the living God*. That is, he recognizes that life can only be had in God. He alone is the source of life. “Having life, [God] can impart life.” [Leupold]
- ✓ He yearns for the opportunity to worship God and craves the fellowship that comes from God, and he can’t experience it. His lament *When shall I come and appear before God* is his grief that he cannot engage in corporate worship. For the Israelite, to go to the Temple to worship was to physically go to the place of God’s dwelling on earth (God “resided” in the Holy of Holies). The Israelites worshipped at the Temple, so to go to worship is to appear before God. But his circumstances are prohibiting him from worshipping and experiencing God’s fellowship.
- ✓ Steve Lawson says, “All the hope, trust, and confidence of the psalmist was in the living God, not the lifeless deities of pagan idolatry. His thirst was for the true God who was self-sufficient, independent, autonomous, and willing to come to the aid of his people.” [224.]
- ✓ But the psalmist is alone in this world. To be alone is to not have fellowship with God. And many people have a sense of that loneliness: “...man lives in an environment where many human beings experience a profound sense of the absence of God.” [R. C. Sproul] And that makes the believer miserable: “Offer a saint what you will, [but] if you deny him God, he will esteem himself miserable. God is the center of his desires; and as long as you keep his soul from its proper center, it will not be at rest.” [Jonathan Edwards] And that is exactly what this psalmist thought he had.
- ✓ When you and I experience seasons of dryness and loneliness, we too will be tempted to despair.

• “I am SUFFERING” (v. 3)

- ✓ The depth of the psalmist’s sorrow become more evident in this verse: *my tears have been my food day and night*. He is “sustained” by his tears — day and night he is overwhelmed with the tears of grief. The tears are the result of the absence of God (v. 2).
- ✓ His grief is compounded because of the suffering he endures from others (v. 3b).

- ✓ Not only is he alone, without God, but he is surrounded by people who reject and mock God.
- ✓ This verse makes it most likely that he was taken captive to Assyria and Babylon and is outside the borders of Israel. In a foreign country, it would be natural to hear these mocking questions.
- ✓ His enemies taunt him by asking perpetually (*all day long*), “*Where is your God?*” This is the same kind of taunting other followers of God received (cf. 59:7; 71:11; 73:11; 94:7; 115:2; 2 Kings 2:14; Mic. 7:10). It was also the taunt hurled at the Savior (Mt. 27:41-43). It was also at the root of Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve — that God would withhold something good from them is to suppose His lack of care and to intimate that He is absent and withdrawn.
- ✓ Undoubtedly the mockers tempted him to think, “I’m separated from God and alone — are they right? Is it possible God doesn’t care, or is incapable, or worse, that He doesn’t exist?” This is the temptation and plight of the suffering psalmist.
- ✓ [Aside: This is also the question that God asks of the nations and their gods: Dt. 32:37; Is. 36:19; Jer. 2:28. This is the wrong question to ask: Ps. 115:2-3; Mal. 2:17. Our God is in the heavens, despite the protestations of the ungodly and the doubters. Don’t let the doubting questions that arise in suffering distract you from the truth of God’s eternal presence and help.]

- “I have LOST worship and ministry” (v. 4)

- ✓ He is not only taunted by the words of the enemies, but also by his own memories. He remembers two things particularly:
 - *I used to go along with the throng* = This pictures the people gathering throughout the nation and making their way to Jerusalem for the three annual pilgrimage feasts (Passover, Firstfruits, and Tabernacles). He remembers the joy of corporate worship — a unified people with one *voice of joy and thanksgiving* — one unified *multitude keeping festival*. Corporate worship was an encouraging stimulant to his own worship and delight in God. [Aside: Too often when we are suffering and hurting, the first thing we do is avoid worship: “it’s too hard...” What we need when we are suffering is someone to lead us into worship when we are struggling and we need a reminder that there are many others who are strong when we are weak — we need to lean on their obedient worship for help. That’s what the psalmist rightly longed to have.]
 - He also used to *lead them in procession...* That is, not only did he go to worship with them, but he was one of the leaders. Maybe he was one of the Levites who lead the singing of the Psalms of Ascent as they went to Jerusalem? He had a place of ministry within the Jewish congregants, and now in his isolation, that too is gone.
- ✓ He has lost so much. He has lost worship. And ministry. And friends. And most of all, he has “lost” (he thinks) God. He is overwhelmed by loneliness and it has provoked him to despair.
- ✓ Some of you are feeling the same way today. You are not in a foreign land, but you feel just as isolated as this psalmist. You are overwhelmed by loneliness and emptiness. Your sense of loss is profound. You are like the fainthearted in 1 Thess. 5:14 — your courage is gone and you have a “small soul” that is having trouble trusting God. Where will you turn for help?

2. God's Provision of Hope (v. 5)

- In *God's Battle Plan for the Mind*, David Saxton writes, "Many Christians are discouraged because they believe the depressing lies of their fallen hearts rather than actively engaging and controlling their minds with the uplifting truths of God and His great redemption." In v. 5, the psalmist controls his mind and directs us into truths that will sustain us in our weariness and weakness.

• Be PATIENT as God works

- ✓ The word **hope** is a word that is often translated "wait." While it anticipates that God will work, it also is a reminder to be patient. God may not act immediately, but that does not mean God will not act. God may not answer a prayer request the first day or even first year, but that doesn't mean He has not heard or that He will not answer.
- ✓ To hope in God is to be confident in God's power and ability and resourcefulness. It is to say to God, "You are my God and I trust what you are doing." Cf. **Ps. 37:1-6**.
- ✓ Notice also that this is a command. Hope is not something that happens to us, but hope is something we exercise. We demonstrate confidence in God and we rest on Him and wait for Him.
- ✓ One theologian noted that "The Christian hope is the hope which has seen everything and endured everything, and has still not despaired, because it believes in God. The Christian hope is not hope in the human spirit, in human goodness, in human endurance, in human achievement; the Christian hope is hope in the power of God." [Barclay, *Letter to the Romans*.]
- ✓ So our hope is not the one of wishes and dreams; it is confidence in God's power and ability. It is confident expectation that God will act at the right time. And it is a living hope (1 Pt. 1:3). It continues into eternity and for eternity. Our hope is alive, because the Savior who gives us hope is alive. Nothing can take His life. Nothing can take our life or our hope.
- ✓ Waiting is hard. Some of you are like me and not very patient (stuck on a bridge this week for 7-10 minutes and it felt like "hours")! Oh friend — do not let a few moments of silence cloud your heart with the perception of God's absence. He is near and He is ready to act. And He will act.

• Continue in (or resume) PRAISE

- ✓ Notice the next phrase — why should he continue to hope (and wait) for God? Because ***I shall again praise Him....*** There is a day coming that the psalmist will praise God (in corporate worship). He is not in that day right now, but it's coming (either on earth or in Glory).
- ✓ And on that day, he will have a more complete picture of God's actions and if he doesn't praise now, he will regret it then. So he reminds himself that he should praise now, even when he cannot see the fulness of God's plan.
- ✓ This is a reminder that it's always a good time to praise God. It's always good to thank God. We say **1 Thess. 5:16-18** almost flippantly. Don't. They are right and true and appropriate.
- ✓ It's always a good time to praise God. If you have stopped because of some loss, start again.

- **God is saving and will SAVE**

- ✓ The psalmist is encouraged to praise God because he remembers who God is — **for the help of His presence**. The reason he should hope in God is because of the nature of God who is helpful in every circumstance and for His eternal presence with His people (**Heb. 13:5b**).
- ✓ What is notable in this verse is the word **help**. It is the word *yeshua* — “God saves.” It is a word of salvation and it is used 45x in the Psalms in this way: **3:8; 14:7; 21:1; 35:9; 53:6; 62:1-2, 6; 68:19; 98:2-3; 118:14-15, 21; 149:14**. The psalmist can hope in God because of the saving power of God.
- ✓ Friend, when God saved you, He made your blind eyes to see and deaf ears to hear. He brought you from darkness to light. He has given you eternal hope. Now in a moment of temporary dark trouble and difficulty, don’t forget what God revealed to you in the light and through the Light. “Don’t forget in the darkness what God has revealed in the light.” He has saved and He will save.
- ✓ It’s also important to note where we also come across this word *Yeshua* again — it is a name that Joseph is told to give to his Son, Jesus, because “He will save His people from their sins” (**Mt. 1:21**). Salvation is always from God and it is particularly in Jesus Christ. While this passage is not speaking of Jesus, it is a reminder of the saving work of the entire Godhead. Friend, if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, you have no hope for an exit plan from your despair and despondency. There is hope in one name and one person only — the name of Jesus Christ. I exhort you to begin trusting in Christ today. Give up and repent of your sins, and ask God for the hope of salvation that will remove both the penalty and power of sin from you and give you a reason to live (**Phil. 1:21**).

- **SPEAK to yourself**

- ✓ I intentionally skipped over the first portion of this verse. After concluding his initial lament, the psalmist stops talking to God (v. 1) and to the other worshippers (vv. 2-4) and begins to address himself: ***O my soul...*** He has two questions for himself:
 - ***Why are you in despair?*** The word “despair” has the sense of “melting” or “dissolving.” Though he lamented his circumstances in vv. 1-4, he now is saying, “Soul, why are you shrinking into emptiness? There is no good reason for your sense of loneliness...”
 - ***Why have you become disturbed within me?*** Here he asks about his inner turmoil and restlessness. He is spiritually distraught without reason. His thinking is skewed and wrong.
- ✓ What I want you to particularly see in this verse is that while he is lamenting and suffering, his words to himself are a reminder to us that we have an ability to command our emotions. Our emotions are not something that happen to us: our emotions (joy, love, fear, anxiousness, grief, discouragement, rest, contentment) are the result of what we think and what we say to ourselves.
- ✓ If you and I will change the way we feel in a given moment, it must begin by transforming our thoughts. And that is exactly what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones so helpful wrote a generation ago:

...the very first thing we have to learn is what the Psalmist learned — we must learn to take ourselves in hand. This man was not content just to lie down and commiserate with himself. He does something about it, he takes himself in hand. But he does something which is more important still, that is he talks to himself. This man turns to himself and says: 'Why art thou cast down O my soul, why art thou disquieted within me?' He is talking to himself, he is addressing himself...

I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing 'ourselves' to talk to us! Do you realize what that means? I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I just trying to be deliberately paradoxical? Far from it. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you'. Do you know what I mean? If you do not, you have had but little experience.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' — what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God' — instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God'.

- ✓ If you and I will change the way we feel in a given moment, it must begin by transforming our thoughts. And in particular, we must change the way we think about God. We must stop looking to ourselves and to our circumstances and look to the God who is over them — a God who is praiseworthy, present, and our salvation. Meditate on those three attributes of God and you will find your heart sustained in great weakness.

3. More Laments of Hopelessness (vv. 6-10)

- "Absence makes the heart grow DESPONDENT" (v. 6)

- ✓ When it comes to our fellowship with God, a sense of His absence will rarely give us greater fondness for Him; it will provoke us to despair and despondency, which is what happened in v. 6.
- ✓ In spite of correcting himself, he finds himself in despair again as he **remembers** what was: the **Jordan** — perhaps the entry of the people into the Land (Josh. 1-2) and the protection this border offered; and the mountains of **Hermon** (north, in Dan) and **Mizar** (unknown) — power & fellowship.

- ✓ The memories should stimulate further faith; we remember God's past provisions of grace to stimulate faith in future provisions of grace. But in this instance, the psalmist did not control his mind and he spiraled into despair...

- "My trials are **OVERWHELMING**" (v. 7)

- ✓ At the River Jordan, he sees water, and now he thinks of one **deep** part of the river calling to another **deep** river and taunting him with trouble — "You drown him..."
- ✓ In the opening lines, water provided quenching power for thirst; now water will destroy him.
- ✓ Notice the progression: from **waterfalls**, pouring water over him, to **breakers** about to turn over him...to **waves** crashing on him and burying him in the water and drowning him.
- ✓ And notice that the psalmist attributes all these things to the Lord — **Your....** He is overwhelmed by his circumstances and he sees it as God's fault (and maybe that God doesn't care?). His footing is gone and he is off balance and unstable and carried under the weight of destruction.
- ✓ Life is too much for him.

- "Has God not **HEARD?**" (vv. 8-9)

- ✓ In the despair of his trouble he reaches out to God in prayer — he has a **song** at night when he is particularly prone to waking up with anxious thoughts (aren't we all?). That song is a **prayer**.
- ✓ If anyone will save him from the water of troubles (v. 7), it will be **the God of my life** — the God who is over life and sustains life (v. 2). It seems that the psalmist is trying to do what he exhorted himself to do in v. 5 — to remember and meditate on God.
- ✓ But this is not a prayer of trust; it's a complaining lament — why have you forgotten me? Yes, he asserts that **God is my rock**, but he also believes he is forgotten, so he **goes mourning**. He is covered in black cloth and publicly laments his condition. Why has God abandoned him? Why has God not heard and answered his prayer? He prays, and "the heavens are brass (impenetrable)..."

- "I am being **PERSECUTED**" (v. 10)

- ✓ In this verse, the affliction of the psalmist moves from taunting (vv. 3, 10b) to physical persecution: **shattering of my bones....** He is physically smashed by his oppressors (which is another reason I believe he has been taken captive to a foreign land). The word "shatter" indicates "grinding" or "crushing." His life is totally crushed by his oppressors.
- ✓ He is not only abandoned and ridiculed, but he is suffering real affliction and persecution. It's the hurt of both words and sticks and stones. He is decimated.

4. God's Final Provision of Hope (v. 11)

- Be **PATIENT** as God works

- ✓ The concluding and final word of the psalm is a rebuke to the psalmist's inclination of heart to despair. The last word belongs to God and His care and provision. As the psalmist reminded himself of these truths in the middle of the psalm, in the midst of his despair, so now he concludes in a comparable manner at the end of the psalm. His soul will not have the final word, but God will.
- ✓ Remember the right timing of God's power to work. Delay from God is not forgetfulness. Quiet from God is not absence. God *will* bring His people home (**2 Tim. 4:18**). Be patient as God works.

- God is **MY** God

- ✓ Verse 11 is virtually identical to v. 5, except for the last phrase: **my God**. God is not just **God** (v. 1). He is not just the **living God** (v. 2). He is not just a worshipped God (v. 3). He is not just the covenant keeping Lord of Israel (YHWH, v. 8). He is not just the rock (v. 9). He is **my God**.
- ✓ The psalmist can say with assurance that he belongs to God and God belongs to him. He is identified with God, connected to God, protected by God.
- ✓ Friend, if you are in Christ, that also is your position; the Father cannot treat you with evil (Mt. 7:11). You are protected by the hand of God (Jn. 10:27-30) and He can no more lose you than He can lose the Christ who is also His Son (**Jn. 20:17-18**).
- ✓ If He is your God, no matter what your circumstances, you are safe. As Oswald Chambers said, "It is not our trust that keeps us, but the God in whom we trust who keeps us."

- **SPEAK** to yourself

- ✓ In our troubles, you and I must not just endure the troubles; we must speak to ourselves in the middle of our troubles and we must speak the truth of God.
- ✓ We must discipline our minds and order our minds to think the thoughts that will drive away despondency and stimulate trust. And the thoughts that do that are the ones that are focused on waiting for God who is working, praising Him in our circumstances, trusting His saving plan.
- ✓ Don't listen to the inclination of your flesh; order your heart and control your mind, and see if He won't stimulate you to greater trust in confidence in Him, despite your circumstances.
- ✓ Speak to yourself — "Hope in God."

CONCLUSION: Do you remember the despondency John Bunyan experienced that we talked about a few minutes ago? Hear what helped him through his grief —

One day as I was passing into the field...this sentence fell upon my soul. *Thy righteousness is in heaven.* And...I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God. [Quoted in Piper, *When the Darkness Will Not Lift*, 20-1.]

On that day and in that moment, Bunyan realized that his answer was outside of himself in the person of God and Christ. God was not opposed to him and had not abandoned him. His provision was the same as our psalmist — it began with a reminder of the truth of the nature and character of God. When we remember God as He is, meditate on His goodness and provision, and correct our wayward hearts, the clouds of discouragement will begin to lift. When weighed down by life, actively and aggressively hope in God.

BENEDICTION: Romans 8:37-39