

Turmoil and Joy

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[0 : 00] Psalm 42. As a deer pants for the 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 flood 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.

My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember you, From the land of Jordan and Hermon, from Mount Misa. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls.

[1 : 12] 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.

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.

[2 : 28] 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 within turmoil within me? Hope in God, For I shall again praise him, My salvation and my God.

This morning we jump into the Psalms, A series of five weeks. Now the Psalms to me are a wonderful go-to place, A regular go-to place, In the struggles of life.

But I think that for lots of Christians, And I think maybe lots of Christians here even, The Psalms are unvisited, Unattractive, Unexplored foreign lands.

They're hard, They're hard work. Ancient songs, And yet, So very suited, To our post-modern society.

[3 : 39] And they're so very suited, Because our post-modern society, Demands, Personal experience. It's all about experience. And you get, Experience in the Psalms, In spade, Spadefuls.

The first concern for people in our society, Including a growing number of Christians, Might I add, Is not so much, Is something true? But the post-modern cry is, Does it work?

Is it real? Will it deliver the experience I crave? Well again, I would say to you, The Psalms take us into the experience, The intense life struggles, Of the writers.

They gave us a model, Of how to balance, At heart, And head, Emotions, And mind, And truth.

Now when we read the Psalms, We easily identify, With the intense feelings, Of the writers. But one of the good things, About the Psalms, Is that the writers don't allow us, To sink into, A mindless emotionalism.

[4 : 52] That is, They don't allow us to, Having identified our feelings, Then become driven by our feelings, In the day-to-day struggles of life. Because the Psalmist will remind us, That our feelings, Are instructed by the truth of God's word, Of God's character, Of God's purpose.

And I've put on the front of the bulletin this week, Something I hope might be helpful for you, As you think about how to read the Psalms. It's not an easy task, But it sure is a rewarding one, And well

worth the effort.

So, Let's jump into the subject this morning, Which I've called, Contrary to what was advertised, I've called it, Turmoil and joy. And I want to jump into the subject, With the question, How do you handle your feelings?

I've got in the bulletin outline there, Three options that are fairly typical. So, Are you in the typical class of ignoring them?

Now, Some Christians have actually been taught, That to acknowledge intense feelings, Is somehow or other unchristian. Somehow or other a sell out, To the mindset of the world.

[6 : 10] And so what they tend to do, Is they tend to ignore them. And they tend to push through their feelings, To do what they believe is right, Regardless of how they feel.

That sort of stiff, British upper lip mentality. Perhaps you typically operate, According to your feelings. And again, There's a growing number of Christians, Who seem to be in this category. Many believe, They should be happy. That's the, Criteria of life. But then, They realize they're not happy.

And so, They get locked into, Changing their external landscape, Or circumstances. Changing that for the better, In the hope that, It will change, Their internal landscape.

Or how they feel on the inside. And so people, As I say, Who are driven by their emotions, Are often driven, Constantly, To change their circumstances, To ones that deliver, The experience they crave.

[7 : 26] Or perhaps you actually, Blame others for your feelings. So sometimes, Christians don't even take, Personal ownership of their feelings, Of their thinking and responses. So, How I feel is always a product, Of somebody else's actions.

And if only somebody else, Would do the right thing by me, Then I, In turn, Will feel better. I'll feel the way, I need to feel, The way I want to feel. Now the writer of Psalm 42 and 43, Wrestles with this problem, At a really, Really personal level.

He's wrestling with the issue, Of how to be God's person, When your heart, Is in total turmoil. In other words, When you're feeling, Really, Really awful.

How do you be God's person? And be real. Now I'm treating the two Psalms as one, As one song, Because most likely, They were one unit originally, Or at least meant to be taken together originally, In terms of the themes.

Psalm 43, Doesn't have a separate heading, And structurally, The two Psalms, Stand together as three units, Each with a chorus, Or a refrain.

[8 : 46] So chapter 40, Psalm 42 verse 5, Why are you cast down on my soul? And then verse 11, Why are you cast down on my soul? And then 43, Five, The same thing, Why are you cast down on my soul?

So thematically, Structurally, And texturally, I'm going to take these three, Two Psalms together. Now, Looking at the content, It's patently obvious, That the writer was going through, A really awful, Time of turmoil, Of mind.

Struggling to hold together, On the one hand, His belief that God loves him, While on the other hand, He feels so disconnected from God, So distant, So remote from God.

But, He wants these two things to dovetail, But, In his current frame of mind, They just won't sit together, Let alone dovetail.

Now, Some commentators, Have suggested, And that's where I originally went with, That the writer is in deep depression. But I actually have come to think, That that would be too narrow.

[9 : 54] Now, The reality is, That we all experience, Deep sadness from time to time. We all feel like we're in a hole, Slowly buried by the struggles of life.

But that doesn't mean, We're clinically depressed. Even though, We might have some, Common symptoms with those, Who are clinically depressed. So, I'm just going for, A deep sadness, A turmoil of mind.

So what does the writer do, As he feels, Bleak, And awful, On the inside? Well, Two major points this morning.

First, He pours out his heart to God, With raw honesty. But, As I read the psalm, I believe it's not despair. The writer expresses, His deepest feelings, And at the same time, Gives structure to the song, Through a series of, Really confronting, Pictures.

42, 1-4, As a deer pants, For flowing streams, So pants my soul, For you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, For the living God.

[11 : 12] When shall I come, And appear before God? My tears, Have been my food, Day and night, While they say to me continually, Where is your God? He feels like a drought, Stricken animal, In thirsty desperation, Sniffing the air, For the smell, Of life sustaining water, Needing refreshment, Longing to be refreshed, As only God can refresh him, But there is no refreshment.

The reality is, That God seems more and more remote. He feels as if he's lost touch with God. And that is something, So distressing to him, Verse 3, That he can't eat, He can't stop crying.

The only thing that's on his menu, Is tears. That's a powerful picture, Isn't it? Even worse, Verse 3, The second half of verse 3, And I'm taking the they, In verse, The second half of verse 3, As not a reference to enemies, But a reference to his tears.

I think, I think it's an internal thing. So in other words, When he's talked about they, Say to me continually, Where is your God? It's as if, He's feeling as if, His own tears are mocking him, Are ridiculing him, Are pushing him towards, Even darker thoughts.

You don't feel connected to God, Because God's not there for you anymore. You're on your own. I think he's describing, A really intense, Internal heart struggle.

[12 : 58] But as I say, It's not yet despair. And then the picture changes, In verse 6, 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.

It seems like, He's changing picture, To the headwaters, Of the Jordan River, In spring.

Now I haven't actually been there, But if you'd like to send me one day, To research this, I'd love to go. But it seems like, He's moved there, As a new picture. The headwaters of the Jordan River, In spring, With huge rapids, Fed by snow melt, From Mount Hermon.

And the picture here, I think is, Which is in contrast, To the previous picture, Where he feels dry, And lifeless. Now he says, I feel like I'm drowning. Life's just, Sucking me under, Like a great whirlpool, In a rapid.

And ultimately, He fears, It's sweeping him away to death. And the deep calling, To deep water, And darkness, And chaos, It's a fearful picture for him.

[14 : 23] As he feels, As if his life, Is so out of control, As if he feels, So disconnected, While he's out of control. And inexorably, Being swept, To his death. But it's even worse, Verses nine and ten, In that section, I say to my rock, My God, 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?

It seems like, It's even worse for him. He has to endure, The ridicule, Of those who oppose him. And I think what he's saying here, Is the pain of that, Is as excruciating, As an infection in your bone.

It's opportunistic. And these, Who oppose him, Seem to have, Taken the opportunity, Of delighting, In his misery, And grief.

And that in turn, I think, Is played into his, Darkest, Most terrifying thought, That God, As he describes here, God, My rock, Has abandoned me.

[15 : 45] And with that, The last thing, That's solid in his life, Is gone. So these, Opposing forces, Whoever they are, Whether they're misguided friends, Or rank enemies, They're an excruciatingly, Painful reminder, Of his darkest thoughts, That God has indeed, Abandoned them.

But again, Black thoughts, Dark thoughts, Are not the same, As despair. Here, 43, One and two, Vindicate me, O God, O God, Defend my cause, Against an ungodly people, From the deceitful, And unjust man, Deliver me.

Again, Hard to know precisely, But it seems to me, That he's, He's feeling, So disheartened, That his reputation, Has been destroyed, Here in this case, By misguided friends, Whose input, Has been ungodly, Untrue, Unjust, Unjust, Unhelpful, Unhelpful, Unhelpful, Unhelpful, Perhaps they suggested to him, That a true servant of God, Wouldn't feel, The way he was feeling, Or that a true servant of God, Would snap out of it, And rise above his feelings, And just get on with it, Or, Perhaps that his, Internal feelings, Were the result of, Unconfessed sin, Which is a really popular one, Among some, Groups of Christians today, Friends, These are graphic pictures, That describe, A situation,

That's not foreign to us, But a situation, That through pictures, We also easily identify with, And feel the, Heaviness of, The awfulness of, And no doubt, Some of you here this morning, With myself, Will be feeling the reality of, This is me, You'll be saying, This is my struggle, Friends, The question then, To push back there is, Are you able to be honest, Before God, About how you feel, Even in your darkest moments, When you feel, He has forgotten you, When you feel, As if you, He's forgotten your situation, And when you feel, As if he's doing nothing, To help you, Or do you, Pretend you're doing okay, And you put on a brave face,

In public, Again, Because you think it's wrong, For a Christian, To be in turmoil, Let alone, Show that he's in turmoil, He or she's in turmoil, And can't admit, To, A sense of drowning, And tears, In your daily diet, And I tell you, For us blokes, That's a particularly, Tough point to get to, Isn't it?

[19 : 05] How many of us here, This morning, Would put our hands up, And say we're in that category, Look, When we're at home, On our own, The thing I want to do most, Is just cry, Alternatively, Instead of being honest, Before God, Christians, Grasp, All sorts of distractions, Means of escape, From their secret turmoil, And sadness, And so, People turn to alcohol, Drugs, Sport, Throw themselves into work, Take up new hobbies, Go shopping, Eat more, Go for pleasure, Holidays, Parties, And so the list goes on and on, There's numerous distractions, Around us, Which work quite well, As diversions in the short term, What I tell you is one, Who's tried a number of them, They don't work long term, We need something more satisfying,

More substantial, To deal with those sort of feelings, Long term, We need to be honest with God, But again, Here we need to be careful, We need to be honest with God, Not simply because we're just, Getting things off her chest, Yelling as it were at God, But because we're telling the one person, Who can truly help us, In our turmoil, Well the second thing he does then, Is he moves towards the Lord, Seeking new delight in him, Not new circumstances, As I hope to be able to, Substantiate by looking at the verses, In a different way now, The chorus, Repeated three times, Is the writer's, Purposeful response, To his turmoil, Just let me read the chorus, Verse five of chapter, Of Psalm 42, Why are you cast down on my soul,

And why are you in turmoil, Within me, Hope in God, Or that verse can actually, That word can actually mean, Wait on God, For I shall again praise him, My salvation, And my God, And that's repeated three times, And not only does it, Shape the writer's, Purposeful response, But I believe, It is the key, To him finding, Verse four of chapter 43, Exceeding joy, It's the key, To finding new joy, And contentment, In the midst of, Ongoing struggle, So two sub points here, First thing he does, Is force himself, To think clearly, Now, As I said earlier, Though realistic, About his feelings, He does not become, Feelings driven,

Now our society, Lives by feelings, By and large, Do whatever makes you happy, Because happiness, Is what everybody deserves, Everybody needs, Now, That pathway, Our society gives us, Is incredibly destructive, But the writer, Chooses a different pathway, Choosing to force himself, To think clearly, About God, And about himself, In relation to God, Verse five, It's as if, Up to this point, His feelings, Have tried to dictate, To him, But in the chorus, It's as if, He pushes back, Against his feelings, And dictates to them, In other words, He's taking himself, In hand, And he's talking, Firmly, And logically, To himself, In the midst, Of his turmoil, Yes, I am feeling, A loss of closeness, And connection with God, But no, That does not mean, That God has changed, His attitude to me, See, So often, Our emotions, Get the better of us, Because we stop, Thinking clearly, And logically, We drift, With our emotions, But the writer, Pushes through, His inner turmoil, Not ignoring it, Not bypassing it, But pushing through it, Recalling, The reality, Of his experience, Of God, In the past, And we'll go back, And have a look, At those first four verses again, In a different light now, And I would say to you, That as he talks, About his thirsting, With such passion,

[24 : 12] For the Lord, Then here's a man, And I assume, It's a man who wrote it, Maybe a woman, But here's a person, Who has obviously, Experienced, Close fellowship, With God, In the past, Only such a person, And only such a past experience, Could produce this picture, Of longing, And thirsting, Only the person, Who has drunk deeply, Of the life-giving water, Of God, Could now long for it, With such a passion, When it's missing, My soul thirsts, For God, For the living God, For the living God, There's a man, Or a woman, Who wants something back, That they once enjoyed, But now have lost, Or feel they've lost, Verse 4, These things I remember,

As I pour out my soul, How I would go with a throng, And lead them in procession, To the house of God, With glad shouts, And songs of praise, A multitude keeping festival, He recalls the sweetness,

Of leading the community, Of worshipping people, To the temple in Jerusalem, So it would possibly be, He was a temple leader, Of some sorts, But he certainly appears, To say here, He remembers well, The times when at the head, Of a great procession, As they celebrated festival, Which was tied to the exodus, And a celebration, Of God's purpose, In the exodus, Which was his commitment, To bringing his, Disconnected far away people, To himself, In a great act, He said, I remember that, Such joy, Such a good reminder, Of God's character, And God's purpose, 42, 8, He talks to himself, About God's covenant faithful, By day, Faithfulness, By day the Lord commands, His steadfast love, That's hesed, And at night, His song is with me, A prayer to the God, Of my life, He talks to himself, About God's covenant faithfulness, And constant personal care, For him in the past, Which in the past, He said, Has been every bit, As continuous, And dominating, As his tears now are, Whatever explains, My turmoil of mine, The writer said, It cannot be, That God has changed, 43, 3 and 4, Again, He conjures up, A picture of the exodus, Send out your light, And your truth, Let them lead me, Let them bring me, To your holy hill, And to your house, Then I will go, To the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy, And I will praise you, With a lyre, Oh God, My God, He reminds himself, Of how God, Led his people, Back from the wilderness, By his word, Through Moses, And by the cloud, Of pillar and fire, And again, The picture is, That God's purpose, Was to lead his people, Out of their awfulness, And back to safety, And security, And joy with him, In his place, Under his rule, And the writer longs for, And anticipates, A similar rehabilitation, In his own life, In his own experience, Because that's what God does, For his people, So he thinks clearly, And the second response, In turmoil, Is waiting patiently, So three times again, In the course, He says hope in God, Or as I've said before, That means wait for God, Can mean wait for God, Now wait for God, Doesn't mean sitting back, Until God fixes things, What it does mean, Is an act of, Entrusting of himself, In the midst of his turmoil, To God's grace, And God's care, Believing that, God will bring him, Through his misery, And return him, To a situation of joy, And praise, But as he anticipates, The future, As he anticipates, Future restoration, I think it's very clear, That his horizon now, Is completely filled, With nothing else, Than God himself, We're not hearing, A horizon filled, [29 : 15] With the possibility, Of new circumstances, In fact, The fact, The fact, The song ends, With a repeat, Of the same old thing, Why are you cast down my soul, Suggests, That the turmoil continues, So it's not, Chained circumstances, Per se, But he now, Enters those circumstances, As a chained man, With his horizons, Filled with God, In the first couple of verses, I don't know whether it's just, The way that's written, Or whether it's deliberate, But in the first section, First four verses, The writer appears, To address God formally, Oh God, My soul pants for you, Oh God, My soul thirsts for God, For the living God, By the time you get to verse five, The language has become, Intensely personal, My God, My salvation God, Literally it is, And in verse eight, Of Psalm 42, It has become, God, My life, Who constantly, Demonstrates his covenant, Faithfulness and love, And in 42, Nine, It becomes, God, My rock, And in 43, Two, It is God, My refuge, And finally, In 43 verse four, It is God, My exceeding joy, What an incredible outcome, What an incredible confidence, In the midst of, Awful turmoil of mind, And so, Here's the picture, Even as he continues, With that, Intense questioning, Of his heart, Why, Why, Why, Why am I feeling so awful, Why is it like this, Why am I like this, As that is raging, Within him, The writer, The writer, Has actually matured, He's moved closer to God, He's got a new vision of God, A new confidence in God, And ultimately, A new joy in God, The two things have happened, Simultaneously, Simultaneously, Simultaneously, Simultaneously, Simultaneously, And I think, Now I could say, And you can challenge me, If you like, Afterwards, He doesn't need, The past experiences, To be repeated, As a proof of God's love for him, And as an evidence of his security, He doesn't need to have, The good old days of festival events, To reassure him in the turmoil, All he desires is God, And he knows this relationship, Is immediate, Real, And satisfying, He doesn't need, His circumstances to change, Because he has God, In his current circumstances, He doesn't need even, To be free from inner turmoil, Because he has God, In the midst of his inner turmoil, And that allows him, And frees him, To express joy, And praise, And thankfulness, To his Lord and Savior, Even as he, Continues, With that internal struggle, Now can I just say, A little bit, Autobiographically, That is the place, We want to aim for, Because try as we might, We won't get rid of the turmoil, You might get rid of one, Manifestation of it, But a new day, A new day will bring, A new form of turmoil, What we need,

Is to find, God in the midst, Of our turmoil, And to be so connected, So connected to him, That we embrace the turmoil, Because we recognize, That that turmoil, Is the very thing, That has pushed us closer to God, But, It's counterintuitive, Isn't it?

[33 : 52] We think the best thing, Is to escape turmoil, But in fact, This guy, This writer, Has found, A new level, Of understanding, A new level, Of trust, And confidence, And joy in God, Through his turmoil, So his circumstances, Remain the same, The turmoil is relentless, But his perspective, Has shifted massively, As I say, He's grown spiritually, And now seems to embrace, His inner turmoil, Because it has brought him back, It has brought him the blessing, Of new joy, And commitment to the Lord, And friends, That model, That we have in Psalm 42, And 43, Is the same model, That comes to us in Jesus, Only supersized, If you want to know, About walking the road of turmoil, Then Jesus, Is the man to look to,

As he approached his death, Jesus knew what it was, To feel that God, Had abandoned him, That God had withdrawn from him, That he was forgotten, And alone, Jesus knew what it was, To be taunted, To have people delight, In his predicament, Hebrews tells us, We have a great high priest, He understands our experience, And at the same time, In Jesus, There's no greater reminder, That God is determined, To bring us disconnected, Far away people, Close to himself, And to make them feel loved, And secure, We've seen it right through, Romans chapter 8, Over the last six weeks, And the gospel means, In a supersized way, That we get the very thing, That writer here, Is aspired to, We get it in spadefuls, In Christ, In Jesus, We get God himself, Guaranteed, And as we look forward to heaven,

We get more of God, And we get pure joy, Without any of the turmoil, Well friends, Let me conclude, I've run out of time again, As usual, Let me conclude where I started, How are you going to deal, With your feelings?

Well, You can ignore, And deny, Inner turmoil, And commit to, Taffing it out, Forcing yourself, To do the right thing, As a display, Of stoic obedience, Well, That might impress, People around you, But it's not a gospel, Shaped response, It's a new form, Of legalism, Where you actually think, Well if I can tough it out, If I can be like this, Then, Perhaps God will be impressed, With me, Or at least others around me, Will be impressed by me, You can simply, Give in to your feelings, And live in the light of them, Determined to reach, For whatever, Distraction appeals to you, Whatever eases your pain, And most quickly, Makes your life happy, And easy, That's a very real option, That lots of us go for, But that's not gospel shaped either, Because what it means is,

That those distractions, You've reached for, Are actually more important to you, More fundamental in your life, Than God himself, Or you can play the victim, Convinced that your feelings, And circumstances, Are the fault of others, And you can focus, All your energies, On changing your circumstances, And seeking to vindicate yourself, And thereby, Think that you're going to, Relieve your turmoil, Many of us have walked down, That pathway a good distance, It's hardly a gospel shaped response, Because it's about me, The gospel response, Is to believe the gospel, More and more deeply, In the midst of turmoil, Rather than to seek, Escape, The struggles of our mind, [38 : 19] And I think our lack of prayer, On the one hand, And our readiness, To embrace, Or reach for distractions, Show that we don't thirst for God, As we ought to, And therefore, We won't find the joy, And the experience we're craving, We settle for a pseudo, Savior, Something that appears, To satisfy our thirst now, Something that will, Appear to quieten our hearts, But something that becomes, More important to us then, Than God, Friends, The struggle, In our hearts, Is relentless, Make no mistake about that, But Jesus, Is the ultimate expression, Of God's commitment,

To lead, His disconnected, Far away people, Home, He alone, Will be the true, Venture, Of your thirst, For real life, Come back to the very thing, I started in our post-modern world, Jesus is the one, Who will provide a life, A real life, That works, Experientially, And demonstrably, A life that works, In our otherwise, Broken, Dysfunctional world, Let me pray, Lord, Help us, Help us, To be honest, To be honest, About our feelings, And yet not driven by them, Help us Lord, To come to you, Through our feelings, Rather than, Become legalistic, In trying to deal with them, In our own strength,

And resources, Help us Lord, To be gospel shaped, Honest, Honest, About our feelings, And yet finding you, In the midst of them, Not an escape, Not ignorance, Not ignoring, But a new focus, And confidence, Help us, We pray, In Jesus name, Amen.