

A Lifting Up for the Downcast

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[0 : 0 0] As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, where is your God? These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. My soul is downcast within me, therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls, all your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs his love, 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 must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony and my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, where is your God?

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

[1 : 5 9] When our soul is downcast, refreshment comes from our hope in God and the knowledge that we will yet be in his presence forevermore.

Moreover, we know as Christians that Christ endured divine abandonment. The ultimate downcasting of the soul to grant us the divine presence and the ultimate uplifting of the soul forevermore.

Well, Psalm 42, as I said, all of the Psalter, which Calvin described as an anatomy of the soul.

Luther called it the Bible in miniature because we see every facet and aspect of Christian experience in it. The first thing to say is that the Bible gives us as believers room for sadness, to express sadness.

It's not all I'm H-A-P-P-Y, where you're forced to put a smile on your face when things aren't great.

[3 : 2 2] And sometimes we can be in environments where, you know, unless you're sort of super cheery, something must be wrong with you. But the Bible has way more depth than that.

And it includes these amazing places where, in God's own inspired words, where the psalmist is pouring out his soul, we can pour out our soul as well.

And we're given permission to do that by God, to come to him with our feelings of sorrow. Sorrow is part of life in our fallen world.

It wasn't part of life in the beginning, but it is part of life now. And the good thing to remember is it won't be part of life in glory.

It is temporary, but it is a reality. And the Bible reflects that reality and gives us room to be sorrowful and to mourn and also to pour out, most importantly, our soul before God himself.

[4 : 33] However, it doesn't lead to a kind of morbid introspection, you know, a kind of languishing in sorrow. What the Bible also offers us is a very profound and not a quick fix, but a profound way out of that sorrow.

Even Psalm 88, which is the one psalm which seems to be just the darkest of all, the psalmist still addresses God as his saviour.

And so he's still aware of his saviour being present. And so we are offered a way out of this state of downcastness.

Now, there are times in all our lives where we've been or we are downcast. Sometimes there's a clear reason for our sorrows.

On other occasions, though, we can't put our finger on what is wrong. It just seems to be as though, as the Bible puts it, the skies are as bronze or brass.

[5 : 45] And there seems to be a sense of that God is far away or there's a weight upon us. But either way, whether we can see the reason or not, the Psalms offer a balm for every complaint.

And Psalm 42 offers us a balm for our downcast souls. One Puritan writer from the 17th century wrote a wonderful...

The Puritans were amazing for lengthy sermons. We probably couldn't cope with them now. They would have... You know, sometimes we say, well, it's a bit many to have, say, five points or something in a sermon.

And one Puritan famously said, and 19thly, because there were so many points to his sermons. But they were physicians of souls.

They had a wonderful love of the Bible and a knowledge of the Bible, but not for its own sake. They were lovers of Christ and they sought to apply the Bible to the heart.

[6 : 49] And they were great pastors and saw how the word could be ministered in all sorts of different situations. But one Puritan writer wrote an entire book, a series of sermons on Psalm 42, called A Lifting Up for the Downcast.

Where do we find that lifting up for the downcast? Well, it consists in remembering, first of all, the psalmist remembers God's faithfulness in the past.

Isn't that a wonderful picture where he remembers going up to the festival? This would be recalling how all of the Israelites would come to Jerusalem at one of the major festivals.

And they would all throng to Jerusalem and there would be processions of people marching up to the temple with shouts of joy and thanksgiving. And the psalmist himself was leading the procession among the festive throng.

He remembers the joys of his life with the Lord in the past and how God has been the source of his delight in the past.

[8 : 09] But as well as just remembering, there's also even a reasoning with ourselves or even a preaching to ourselves.

Do you see how the psalmist addresses his own soul? He says, Yeah, he's preaching to himself.

He sees that his soul is downcast and he says, Why are you downcast? Why so disturbed? And what is the balm? Put your hope in God.

Put your hope in God. So there's a way in which we do have to preach to ourselves or apply the word to ourselves or reason with ourselves.

When we find ourselves in the midst of sorrows, that God is with us in the midst of it. And that we are continually reminded to put our trust in him.

[9 : 14] We can also, as well as remember his faithfulness to us in the past and the times of delight that we've spent with him, worshipping him and with his people.

We can also be praying to him in the present. We can be praying to him in the present. He pours out his soul now.

He feels comfortable enough, able enough, in close enough of a relationship with God to reverently pour out everything that's on his heart before the throne of grace.

And, you know, it's like the hymn, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. The things that we often carry when we could have taken them to God in prayer.

Here's an example that you can pour out your entire heart, your entire soul before the throne of grace. To one, not only who is listening, but one who has the power to help.

[10 : 24] The one who has the power to draw near and grant us grace in our time of need. And so sometimes that just looks like clinging. Just clinging on to the Lord.

We can even make, you know, pouring our heart out sound romantic or pious or something like that. But it's just being humble enough to say, I can't cope, but I know I have you.

And unburdening yourself. Cast your cares upon the Lord, for he cares for you. And so that is something that we are invited into doing.

And something we should do. Because if we don't, then we are carrying a burden that we aren't able to continue to carry.

And so we are invited to pour out our soul to the Lord. Isn't that a relief? You can go to your heavenly Father, who knows everything anyway.

[11 : 36] And unburden yourself of whatever is troubling you. But not only that, we can look at God's faithfulness in the past. We can pray to him in the present.

And often that just looks like hanging on. But we can also look forward to the fact that we shall yet praise him. And these glory days that the psalmist sort of is reminiscing about, about going up to the temple.

That's not just in the past. That's just a foretaste, in fact, of the future. The best in the Christian life is always, in this pilgrimage, yet to come.

Because we're not in glory yet. And so even how it was such a joyous occasion when he's remembering going up to the temple with all of God's people. And they're going up to the temple to worship the Lord.

And they're shouting and they're singing. He also is reminding himself that he will yet praise him.

[12 : 40] In verse 5. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him.

My Saviour and my God. There's something about knowing God that gives us an assurance. Sometimes it can waver.

Sometimes it is weak. But we know that he will ensure that we are preserved till the end. And that therefore we will yet praise him.

And it does waver, doesn't it? Verse 9. I say to God, my rock. So he's still saying God is his rock. And that's this unmovable, entirely reliable person.

But he's saying it feels like I've been forgotten. Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

[13 : 40] It feels like that. But ultimately the last word is in the psalm. Again, why are you downcast, O my soul?

Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him. My Saviour and my God. Not just my God.

My Saviour. He trusts in God, actually, to save him. So it's not just that he has an idea of God as one who rules over all creation and is all-powerful.

He also knows God as his personal Saviour. One who is going to ultimately deliver him from his troubles, from what afflicts him.

And there seem to be outward troubles and inward troubles. Both. People are taunting him and oppressing him. But also his soul is very downcast. But in both respects, God is his Saviour.

[14 : 44] And he knows he will yet praise his Saviour. Because God has promised to save to the uttermost. That means to the max. There's no doubt about salvation being full and free and final when we've put our trust in God.

Therefore, even in the midst of this, he knows, I know I will yet praise you. I know I'll be in your presence. And that thirst that we hear at the very start, it's like a deer thirsting for water.

And you imagine in the Judean wilderness, not here where there's plenty of water. Panting for water. Thirsting for God's presence in this wilderness.

Finally, that thirst being forever quenched in the divine presence forevermore. And actually, that thirsting, that craving God's presence, is actually a good sign.

Because it's far better to be thirsty than not be desiring God's presence. And not to be ever seeking him and actually to be thirsty and not know it.

[16 : 03] And to end up dehydrated and dying. Because our thirst hasn't awoken our need for God. And it's this thirst that seems to trigger in the psalmist his prayer.

His prayer which concludes with putting his trust in God, the one he thirsts for. Finally, we of course see Christ at the heart of this psalm.

One of his words on the cross was, I thirst.

And of course, there would have been this intense physical thirst that Christ endured amidst all his physical torment on the cross.

But a far greater thirst was the fact that God's presence was withdrawn.

[17 : 11] The divine abandonment, divine dereliction. He thirsted. We also see again in verse 7, the way the King James puts it.

All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Many fishermen here will just understand the weight and the magnitude of an expression like that.

All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me on the cross. And in verse 10, my bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me.

Saying to me all day long, where is your God? We remember the taunts of those at the foot of the cross.

If you are the son of God, save yourself. And so we see in Psalm 42, Christ, the one who was forsaken by God, so that we would be forgiven by God.

[18 : 36] The one who endured divine absence, so that we might enjoy the divine presence forever.

And he now offers us the only water that truly quenches our spiritual thirst. When he was speaking to the woman of Samaria at a well, Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.

But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water, welling up to eternal life.

And later in John's Gospel, in chapter 7 and verses 37 and 38, we read, On the last and greatest day of the festival, see the parallel there with the festive element in Psalm 42, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. We needn't look for sources of satisfaction to quench our thirst outside of us anymore, because they're actually welling up within us.

[20 : 16] The Holy Spirit's indwelling is described as a well of water, continually overflowing within us and providing us with all the refreshment we need.

If you are parched, if you are downcast, remember the Lord's blessings in the past, and number them, if you can, one by one, his goodness and his faithfulness in the past.

your times of close fellowship with him and with his people. Cling to him today. And remember that if you're trusting in Christ and in him alone, it's important that we only trust in Christ alone for our salvation, not Christ and something else, or Christ and I'm also quite a good guy.

just Christ alone for our salvation. We remember and look forward to the fact that this sense of desertion and this sense of sorrow will pass because when this pilgrimage is over, you will rejoice in his presence forevermore.

Amen. Amen.