

Hope in God

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St. John's Shaughnessy Church of someone in deep distress.

[6 : 1 3] And I just, I want you to know how deep the distress is. Look at verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 42. Here is someone who feels the absence of God.

Look at verse 3. They are close to tears all the time and they cannot eat. Look at verse 6. They're isolated, alone, far away from home.

Verse 7. They're overwhelmed, oppressed by enemies, mourning in deep grief. In verse 10.

They are suffering physically. Or in chapter 43 too, they feel cast off, abandoned by God.

No wonder they're downcast and in turmoil. This is genuine spiritual distress, discouragement, depression. And my question is, now what do we do with someone who is facing this kind of despair?

[7 : 1 8] What do you say to someone who comes to you and says, it doesn't matter what I do, it seems as though God is a million miles away. Or someone comes to you and says, I'm not sure but I think I might be depressed.

Or someone comes to you and says, my spiritual life feels flat, hard and dry and I feel spiritually burned out.

Or perhaps more poignantly, what do you do when something like that happens to you? Because I think one of the problems for us as Christians is that we speak a very high language.

We speak of God as the fulfillment of our desires, which he is. We speak of faith, hope and love and eternal truth. But what happens when things get so difficult that we cannot even pray and it feels as though God has cast us off?

I think as Christians we tend to fall into two patterns. On the one hand we tend to blame others for our predicament. Others have let us down and we've been disappointed. They've not done what we hoped or expected and we are the victim of their failures.

[8 : 2 9] And it's our right to complain and we'll keep complaining even though it doesn't really change the situation. And the other pattern is to blame ourselves. We feel profoundly disappointed in ourselves.

And we feel deeply guilty. We ought not to feel this way. So we hold it down, press it in and try and keep everything on the surface smooth.

And underneath the storm only gets worse. Well, Psalm 42 and 43 show us a different way. What's unique about these psalms, this psalm, is that in every other psalm, when the psalmist struggles, they struggle with God or they struggle with enemies.

But in this psalm, the psalmist struggles with himself. There are three sections. Let's look at them quickly together. I wonder if you would read with me, please.

42, 1 to 5, which is the first section, so that we have it in our hearts and minds. As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.

[9 : 40] My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, where is your God?

These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

See, here is the problem. The psalmist knows Psalm 1. He knows that we're supposed to be like a tree, planted by streams of water, with leaves that wither not, that bring forth fruit in the right time. But instead he says, I feel shriveled, cracked, dried up. And he knows the words of Psalm 36, which talk about the fact that God gives us drink from the river of thy delights, with thee is the fountain of life.

[10 : 58] And he knows Psalm 23, where God promises to lead us beside still waters and restore our soul. But he can't feel it. What he feels with a searing intensity is the barrenness and the sterility and the hardness of his own heart.

Now I don't know if you've ever really had a drought here in BC. In Australia when a drought comes, it's very different from here. A few years ago we had what was called a drought here, and the only restriction we had is you couldn't water your lawn between certain hours.

In Australia when a drought comes, lakes dry up. I remember driving to the capital city during a drought, and there is a huge lake, 50 miles long outside of Canberra, and it was dry.

There was nothing there. And as it dries, we're left with this hollow that's cracked, and utterly bare, longing for precious water to come and fill it again. That's how he feels.

And he could easily, of course, deal with this pain through a variety of addictions. He could go and distract himself with some deception. But he knows that that will not solve the real issue, because at the root of our longings and our restlessness is our thirst for God.

[12 : 21] That's the point of verses 1 and 2. He longs for these spiritual streams of life. He longs for God. He thirsts for God, for the living God.

And that is why at the end of verse 2 he says, I want to see your face, God, but I can't. It's hidden. I'm not a camel out in the desert. You know, I've got my own reserves and I can continue going. I'm parched and I'm vulnerable. And I know that the only true refreshment will come from your presence, but I cannot feel it. And he has the honesty not to pretend, but to bring it up before himself.

Here is the thing for the psalmist. It is exactly himself which is the problem. See in verse 3, the only water that he is experiencing is his own constant tears.

But in the second half of that verse, the word men is not there. It says, My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me, my tears say to me, where is your God?

[13 : 25] He knows he is weary and flat and stale and discouraged and he feels guilty about the whole experience. And his ongoing tears accuse him and say, Come on, you're supposed to be a Christian.

Christians don't feel this way. Maybe he's had some friend who's very helpfully told him there's sin in his life. If you are a new Christian, it might be helpful to know that there are some Christians who think that if you experience dryness or depression, it's your own fault.

Which makes it so much the worst for them when they come to face it for themselves. If you've begun to follow Jesus, there will be difficult times. There will be dryness.

And it may have its roots in something physical or emotional or psychological or some traumatic grief. It doesn't really matter. It will always come to bear most painfully on your relationship with God.

And your tears will say to you, Where is your God? It will seem as though your own spirit, your own soul itself, is your own worst enemy.

[14 : 34] And you'll ask the same questions as the psalmist asks. When will I see your face? Where is God? Why are you so cast down, O soul? Why are you so disquieted upon me?

So the first five verses tell us to struggle with ourselves. The second verses, the second section tells us to struggle with God. Let's read those together.

Starting from verse 6 down to verse 11. My soul is cast down within me. Therefore I remember thee from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mismar.

Deep calls to deep. Under thy hands, All I did is man Jew should press onto me. I gave your word. ■■■ honestly has gone.

Then I have songs for escut'r. Where is the trial done? Please do not'r all. I ask Imran. Why do I hold?

[15:39] Does the gecko'e mean? As a Abraham moved from Moore, I have to say his heart. I have to say his heart. Where is he God?

I have to say his heart. I have to say his heart. For he is God. I have to say his heart.

It's interesting. There's no flash from heaven at the end of verse 6. There's no quick and easy answer, but there's still deep honesty. But did you notice there's a change?

In this second section. Nothing's changed in his circumstances. Nothing's changed in his feelings. But in verse 6, he addresses God really for the first time.

Now he doesn't speak to and question his own soul. Now he speaks to and questions God. He says, look, my soul is cast down upon me.

[16:37] My soul does seem to be the problem. The very center of my being is hard and unresponsive and dry. Therefore, I will remember thee, you.

Even though I feel light years away from where I should be, I want to admit my discouragement and my disappointment, not just to myself, but to God himself.

And in verse 7, he tells God exactly what he's feeling. This is a wonderful verse where he brings his theology and his experience together. I think verse 7 says it all.

Deep calls to deep. This word deep is the same word used in the first chapter of the Bible for the dark, watery chaos at creation. He says, my life is in chaos and I'm so overwhelmed.

It feels like the flood of Noah washing over me. What is more, he says, the cataracts, the waterfalls that are drowning me are thy cataracts.

[17:39] And the waves and the billows are thy waves and thy billows. He's talking to God now. He acknowledges that God is sovereign and God is in control.

To be sure, this is not the quiet waters of Psalm 23. But to a dry man, God seems too much to take in.

He says to God, I wanted a drink and you give me the ocean. Here is the key. He acknowledges that even the dryness and even the difficulty come to him from the hand of God.

And I think this is the pivot and the turning point in the psalm. Because as he addresses himself to God, he begins to realize who God is.

And there are two very small changes, very important changes that happen in this section. The first is that he gets clarity about who God is. Look at the verses following.

[18:41] In verse 8, the Lord is the God of steadfast love. At the end of that verse, he is also the God of my life. But then in verse 9, God, he says, is my rock.

In the middle of the stormy sea and the raging waves, I can just feel beneath my feet a rock. Otherwise, I would utterly drown. And secondly, he gets clarity not only on God, but on his circumstances.

Because in verse 9, he feels forgotten by God, not just because of what's happening inside him, but because of the opposition and the oppression of those around him.

In verse 10, he confesses a deadly wound in his bones. This is the basis of the taunting of his enemies. And again, we have the chorus in verse 11.

So the first section teaches us to struggle with ourselves. The second teaches us to struggle with God. The third section tells us very simply to ask God.

[19:45] Let's read Psalm 43. Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people. May I ask God, and defend my ex- honestly, I'm a sin in the same room.

As I ask God, why I'm a taking away it. Amen.■■■ expressing nothing Wonderful. There's a shift, but it's a small shift.

Not such a big leap from struggling with God to asking God and praying for specific things. Again, the storm has not abated.

The turmoil is still there. But in Psalm 43, in this third section, we get a growing sense of the reality of God and the fact that God will act. That's why he says, vindicate me.

It is a specific and unambiguous request to God. It's a movement from that visceral, I thirst, and a focus on himself.

[21 : 19] Now the focus is on God. And in verse 2, God is now the one in whom I take refuge. He's not just a rock which I can touch with my feet. He is the one in whom I go for protection.

He still feels cast off and he's still in mourning. But in verse 3, he now looks to God and he says to him, send out your light and your truth so that they will lead me to where you are.

You remember back in verse 2, instead of the despair of when shall I see your face, he now takes hold of God's two ambassadors, his light and his truth, and he prays specifically that God would send them to him so that they would lead him back to God's presence.

Then he says, I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy. God is now not just the remote source of joy. He's not just the absent giver of joy, but he knows that God is joy himself.

And the chorus comes back again. And I think each time the chorus comes back, it's said slightly differently. Now for the third time, the emphasis is on the last line.

[22 : 31] Hope in God. Wait for God. I shall again praise him. My help, my salvation, my deliverer, my God. I want to conclude with this.

Christian life includes very deep water. You know that if you've been a Christian for some time, you've experienced this, and you know that the Bible doesn't come along to you and say, cheer up. It says, this is real, and here is the promise. These psalms, Psalm 42 and 43, are very important for us because they contain two vital spiritual disciplines for that tough experience.

The first discipline is this. Talk to yourself. Talk to yourself. You may think this is close to madness, but in spiritual terms, it is the beginning of spiritual sanity.

The question is, are you speaking to yourself or are you allowing yourself to speak to you? When we feel utterly dry and abandoned and overwhelmed and hard and flat and beyond God's help, it's almost impossible to kneel down and pray to God.

[23 : 55] Before we can do it, if you can't do it, what you must do, before you pour out your soul to God, you've got to be honest with yourself and pour out your soul to yourself.

That's exactly what the psalm says in verse 4 of 42. Just look at verse 4. Do you know the normal words in the psalms are these, I will pour out my soul before God.

But it says here, these things I remember as I pour out my soul, literally, upon myself. Three times in the chorus when he says, why are you cast down, oh my soul?

Come on soul, answer me. Why are you cast down? Why are you so disquieted upon me? It's the same word. And when he says, hope in God, grammatically, that should be a prayer to God, but it's not.

It's a command to himself. And I think this is a vital skill that we need to learn. We need to be able to take ourselves in hand and to bring the truth that we know about God to bear on the reality of our experience.

[25 : 04] Because as believers, we are two very different kinds of things. On the one hand, we are men and women of faith, saved by the grace and loving kindness of God, moving towards an eternity where we gaze upon his face and one another.

And on the other hand, we are also weak, fragile and sinful, prone to self-justification, prone and addicted to self-absorption and disbelief and disobedience.

Yes, we live with the reality of eternity before our eyes and the promises of God, but we do so in hearts and in bodies that are under constant pressure. And this psalm tells us as believers to take both sides of ourselves with deep seriousness.

That's the first spiritual discipline. Talk to yourself. The second is, very simply, talk to God. Only after he's talked to himself and taken himself in hand in the first section does he then move and struggle with God in the second and then pray to God in the third.

And I think it takes a level of courage and honesty to admit to ourselves our own inner wasteland. And only when we come to the end of ourselves can we bring ourselves truly before God.

[26 : 19] But the psalmist is not content to just speak to God. It's not enough to be truthful with ourselves because if we just end with being truthful ourselves we still long to see the face of God and have communion with him.

And that is why most of the questions are in the second section. Why? Why? Where? Why? Why? So when he asks these questions of God he realises that God is very much involved in the ordinary circumstances and even in the difficulty.

God is not so much distant and inaccessible but God is there. And I think it's vital for everyone who feels dry and flat and stale and hopeless to remember that the very waves that threaten us come to us from the hand of God.

It is the same hand that reaches out to us with steadfast love. It is the same hand that is underneath us as a rock for our feet. And God is there whether you feel him or not.

And God's steadfast love is real whether we feel overwhelmed or cast off. And God is a rock and a refuge whether our lives feel like they're in chaos or control. It doesn't really matter.

[27 : 38] It does but it doesn't. And that realisation must be turned into prayer specific prayer for the future grounded on the promises of God. And I think for us this morning our promises are more clear and more precious because Jesus has come and Jesus is the fulfilment of every section and part of this psalm.

if you are thirsting it is Jesus who is the source of living water. Come to him and keep drinking of him and you'll never thirst again.

If you feel like your life is in chaos you know that it is Jesus Christ who came and took all the chaos of our lives upon him and in his death the waves of God have gone over him.

If you want the presence of God it is Jesus who is the light of God and the truth of God. Look to him believe in him cling to him hope in him for I shall again praise him my salvation and my God.

Amen. This digital audio file along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohnschaughnessy.org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

[29 : 23] We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you I will see you YouTube and I will ask you to speak about everywhere and toign for the book and Arauseam six