

Psalm 42 - "Hope for a Hopeless Soul"

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Preacher: Guest: Jay Sklar

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

One of the joys of an interim period in the life of the church is that we get to have guests come on occasion and feed us from God's Word and spell me and Chad or spell you from me and Chad, however it is that that works out. I'm not sure which one it was.

It's a particular privilege to introduce you to pastors who have pastored me. Jay is one of those. Jay is an Old Testament professor at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis.

As Chad and I both attended there and learned from him, some teachers teach, and that's wonderful. Some shepherds you as you're developing in your own life and learning God's Word there.

Jay is one of those who's done that for us, has done that for me. When one of our previous pastors, Jake Patton, and I were ordained here several years ago, we invited Jay to come and preach that service. Many of you who were here will remember repeating after him the words, will is not the Christ. So he also keeps me in my place, for which I'm very grateful. I'm so excited to have Jay shepherd all of us this morning. I'm eager to hear with you.

[1 : 39] Jay has asked me to read our passage this morning, which is Psalm 42. This is the Word of God, Psalm 42.

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 continually, 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 of Hermon, from Mount Mazar.

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 continually, 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. Thus far, God's holy, inerrant, and infallible word.

Well, good morning. Am I on? Good morning. Good morning. Thank you, Will. Thank you for your kind words. One of the greatest joys and encouragements for me is to come and to see former students and friends now involved in leading and shepherding God's word. It just, my heart is smiling very deeply right now. When I was a young boy, maybe around 10 or 11 years old, there was a period of time where my mom would try to help my brother and I get to sleep every night by playing a record.

[4 : 14] And it struck me that some of you here might not know what a record is. So, last night I asked, Will and Christy, you guys have a record. They didn't have any records. Chad and Annalise, you guys have a record. They didn't have any records. But they tracked one down for me.

It was delivered this morning. I won't tell you who brought it, but the Romantics was the one that they happened. This is not what my mother played to me, by the way, every night. But this is, if you've never seen one, especially kids here, this is what a record looks like. And it kind of works like a CD. And a CD is kind of like an MP3 on a coaster, right? By the way, it would spin around and you'd put in the record player, it'd spin around and then it would play the songs. And one of the songs that my mom used to play was called, As the Deer Pants for the Water. How many here know that song?

Let's just sing the first verse together, shall we? I'll start us off and then very quickly, please drown out my voice. All right? Go with the chorus if you know it.

You alone are my strength, my shield. To you alone may my spirit yield. You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship. Actually, isn't that a beautiful song? Perfect.

song to play somebody to fall asleep. And you may have noticed it's based on Psalm 42. I love that song. There's just one problem with it. It completely misses the mood of Psalm 42.

[6 : 43] When you hear a song like that, if you were to picture in your mind what the person who is singing or writing the song is feeling, what kind of thoughts come to your mind?

I mean, as I listen to a song like that, I think of somebody who is, they are by a bubbling brook. It is sunny outside. They have just been reading their Bibles, and they feel so close to God.

Doesn't it feel that way? I mean, their hearts are full. They've just been feasting on some experience of the Lord, and they just want more and more. That's how the song feels. If you noticed in Psalm 42, the psalmist, the person who wrote the psalm, feels exactly the opposite.

The person who wrote Psalm 42 doesn't feel like they're having a mountaintop experience with God. They feel like they're in the deepest, darkest valley.

They feel like they're in the deepest valley. They feel like they're in the deepest valley. The person who wrote Psalm 42 doesn't feel like God is so close that you could touch Him. They feel like God is a thousand miles away.

[8 : 10] The person who wrote Psalm 42 doesn't have a heart that's feasting on God. They have a heart that is drier than desert dust.

What's going on in Psalm 42 to lead a person to think and to feel that way?

What I'd like to do is walk through the psalm by just asking three questions of it. You'll see it on the back of your bulletin. The three questions are these. What is the psalmist feeling? Why is he feeling that way, and what does he do about it?

What is the psalmist feeling? Why is he feeling that way, and what does he do about it? First question, what is the psalmist feeling? And you can answer this question in a couple different ways.

On the one hand, the psalmist is feeling deep emotional suffering. Deep emotional suffering.

[9 : 14] In fact, he gets at this a bunch of different ways. Look at verse 3. My tears have been my food.

My tears have been my food. In other words, this person is at a point of such despair and sadness that they've lost their appetite.

And many of you know what this is like. Years ago, I lost a nephew. It was one of the most painful things I had ever experienced in my life.

And my sadness hijacked my hunger. That's what the psalmist is experiencing. No hunger.

No interest in food. My tears have been my food. Verse 3 says, My tears have been my food day and night. In other words, even when he lies down on his bed at night and he closes his eyes, the drumbeat of sorrow just keeps pounding.

[10 : 30] And no matter how tightly he shuts his eyes, the tears keep streaming through. I mean, he just, he can't shut it off.

Verse 5. Why are you downcast, O my soul? The Bible uses this word in another passage to describe somebody who has just learned that his mother has died.

Just learned it. One of the most painful things that you can experience in life. That's what the psalmist is experiencing.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in despair? That's a word that's used to describe, have you ever felt like your heart is turned inside out with grief?

It's like this bucking bronco that you can't wrestle to the ground. You can't stop the sadness. You can't stop the sorrow.

[11 : 40] That's what the psalmist is feeling. Deep emotional suffering. And along with this suffering, perhaps because of this suffering, the psalmist also feels utterly alone.

Completely forsaken. When he says in verse 1, as the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, you know what he's describing here?

He's describing a drought. He's describing a drought where there is no water to be found. And we actually have elsewhere in the Bible a description of what a drought was like in Israel.

Jeremiah chapter 14, we read these words, In other words, the ground is cracked because there is no rain. The farmers are dismayed. Even the deer in the field deserts her newborn fawn because there is no grass.

In other words, when there was a drought in Israel, you got so desperate for just a drop of water that even a mother deer would forsake her newborn because she could think of nothing else except getting some relief from her thirst.

[13 : 22] It's a horrible thirst. And the psalmist is saying, Lord, I just want a drop, just a drop of your presence and of your comfort and of your love.

When I was 16 or 17 years old, my family was in the midst of a really tough time. It was just a year or two away from my parents separating.

And I remember one afternoon, feeling the pain of that so keenly, I went into my bedroom and I shut the door and I literally fell on my knees and I began to pray, Oh, Lord.

Oh, Lord. Please help. Please comfort me. Please take away the pain. And I wish I could tell you that the ceiling of my bedroom parted and this beam of sunshine came in.

But the heavens that day were silent. I didn't feel a drop of comfort or relief.

[14 : 50] And that's where the psalmist is. What's he feeling? Deep emotional suffering, tears streaming down his face and feeling utterly alone.

That's what he's feeling. Well, why is he feeling that way? Why is he feeling that way? We get a hint of this in verses 9 and 10.

As we read these, what you'll see is that the psalmist is in the midst of some sort of trial, some sort of suffering, and he's got enemies around him who are piling on, who are pouring salt into the wound.

Verse 9, I will say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, where is your God?

You see what's happening here. He's in the midst of some sort of trial, some sort of suffering. He doesn't name what it is. He doesn't tell us. And you'll notice, actually, often as you're reading through the psalms, they describe the trials pretty generally.

[16 : 07] And I think the reason is that by describing them generally, it's an invitation for you and for me to be able to identify because we can sort of, it's almost like when you read about a trial, the invitation is, oh, and by the way, insert your personal trial right here.

So we can really identify with what's going on. So we don't know what's going on, but some trial, and there are enemies around who are saying this to him. You claim to be one of those followers of the Lord.

And he makes all sorts of promises for you. Doesn't he say he's a God of steadfast love? Doesn't he? Doesn't he say he's a God who's with you?

Doesn't he? Doesn't he say he cares for you and loves you? Doesn't he? Well, those promises don't line up with your life right now. Where is your God?

Give it up. It's all a sham. None of it's real. Some of us here have experienced this, do experience this, with family or friends who aren't excited about the fact we've decided to follow Jesus.

[17 : 25] And when life goes badly, the whispers start. Oh, is this what happens when you become a follower of Jesus? Is this how he cares for you?

For others of us, it's not family or friends that whisper that to us. It's our own hearts that whisper that to us.

Even if we don't want them to, they reflexively in the midst of trial can begin to say, where is your God? Look, what you're experiencing in life doesn't seem to line up with his promises.

What is a psalmist feeling? Deep, emotional, suffering, utterly alone. Why is he feeling that way? He's in the midst of some sort of trial, some sort of difficulty.

And he has people around him saying, where is your God? This doesn't line up. Well, what does he do about it? The psalmist actually does, as you go through here, he does at least four different things.

[18 : 40] The first thing he does is one of the most simple and yet one of the most important. The first thing he does is he keeps talking to the Lord.

He keeps talking to the Lord. Psalm 42 is a prayer. Verse 1, As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

Verse 9, I will say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? See, he's praying to God. And the reason he keeps praying to God, let me put it this way, the danger is not feeling like God is far away.

That's not the danger. The danger is not feeling like God is far away. No, the danger is believing your feeling and acting as though it's true.

That's the danger. It's not feeling that God is far away, it's believing the feeling and acting as though it's true. Because if you believe that's true, what are you going to stop doing?

[19 : 55] You're going to stop talking to God. And once you stop talking to God, what happens? Relationship with Him becomes impossible.

When there's no communication, relationship is impossible. And so, the psalmist keeps talking to God. He even says things to God that you and I might not always feel comfortable saying.

Why have you forgotten me? And depending on who we are, some of us might say, well now, theologically, of course, I know God hasn't forgotten me and so I shouldn't say things like that.

Look, God gives us these prayers in His Word as model prayers. If you're feeling this way, in His love for you, God's given you words that you can use so that you keep talking to God.

God. That's the first thing the psalmist does. He keeps talking to God. The second thing he does, he remembers what is true about the past.

[21 : 06] The second thing the psalmist does is he remembers what is true about the past. You see this in verse 4. These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me for I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with the voice of joy and thanksgiving.

A multitude keeping festival. And you can almost see him. He is thinking back to those times when he and other worshipers of God would go up to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

And when you went up in the ancient days, you would go up with singing and with dancing. And I mean, it was a joyful time. And he's remembering those times where he has sensed the presence of God, when he has known the reality of God, when he has experienced God in the midst of worshiping with his people, he is remembering those times from the past and he realizes, he recognizes it is crucial for him to do so for this reason.

When you and I are in the midst of depression and despair, it begins to feel like we're put in this cement windowless box.

There's a wall behind us that cuts us off from any hope from the past. Depression and despair, they put a wall in front of us that cuts us off from any hope from the future.

[22 : 43] Depression and despair, they put walls beside us so that as we look around in the present, we can't see any glimpses of hope. And depression and despair, they put a wall over top so that it feels like our prayers bounce off the ceiling.

And where do we end up? We end up in this cement pillbox of depression and despair. And so what does the psalmist do? Do you know what he's doing here?

He's blowing out the back wall so that the light can come back in. He's remembering what is true from the past in terms of his experience with God.

Ski and I have a friend, I'll call him Steve, and years ago, Steve called us one day, talked with us on the phone, shared with us.

He had been praying for decades that his mom would become a Christian. And he was calling to let us know that a few weeks before she passed away, she had decided to give her life to Jesus, to become a follower of Jesus.

[23 : 56] And he was so thankful to God for hearing his prayers. And we rejoiced with him. Four weeks later, we caught up with Steve over coffee.

And as we talked, he began to share with us about a trial he was going through. He said, for years, for years, I've prayed that the Lord would provide a wife.

And the Lord hasn't answered that prayer. And it's been deeply painful for me. And the longer he talked, his sadness turned to anger, until he finally looked at us with this face of deep hurt and anger and said, God never hears my prayers.

Now, his pain was very real. And I don't minimize it in any way whatsoever. And in that moment, it seemed that what he needed most was not any correction, but just for us to listen and to love and to bear that burden with him.

But inside my heart was breaking saying, oh Steve, Steve, remember. Don't you remember just four weeks ago?

[25 : 32] God. You see, the psalmist, in the midst of his despair, he keeps talking to God, and he remembers what is true about the past.

There's a third thing the psalmist does. The third thing is that the psalmist remembers what is true about the character of God right now in the present. The psalmist remembers what's true about God right now in the present.

And he does that so that it can serve as a touch point of reality for him. Let me explain it this way.

I have a friend who's a pilot, flies small planes. And he's told me, you know, when you're flying, if it's daytime and good weather, you know, there's a lot that you can do just flying by sight.

You see where the horizon is, you know if you're headed up or down, you can look out the side, get a sense of your speed, all that kind of thing. But he said if it turns dark, or if thick fog rolls in, then as a pilot you can experience something that they have a name for, they call it spatial disorientation.

[26 : 50] And all of a sudden you lose your bearings. And when you're in the midst of this, you can actually feel like your plane is headed up when in reality it is headed straight for the ground.

It's incredibly dangerous to fly by your feelings and that moment. And so of course, well why aren't more planes crashing into the ground? Well because pilots know, oh at that moment what do I need to do?

I need to look at my instrument panel. The instrument panel provides that touch point of reality against which to check my feelings.

See that's what the psalmist is doing here. You see this in verse 8. The Lord will command his loving kindness, steadfast love in the daytime, his song will be with me in the night.

You see what he's doing? He's reminding himself of what is true about the Lord. This is a God of steadfast love. In fact, do you remember? This is not the first time in this psalm we've heard the words day and night.

[28 : 06] Do you remember where the first time was? Verse 3, my tears have been my food when? Day and night.

And what does the psalmist say in verse 8? The Lord will command his steadfast love in the day time. His song will be with me in the night.

And the psalmist is choosing to live his faith not by his feelings but by reminding himself what is true about the Lord to provide those touch points of reality in the midst of the storm.

There's a final thing the psalmist does. You see it in verse 5. The psalmist remembers God's promises for the future.

Why are you downcast O my soul? Why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God for I shall again praise him the help of his presence.

[29 : 11] You see what he's saying? Soul. What he's doing here actually he is grabbing his soul by the scruff of the neck and saying remember have hope because the God you worship is a God who gives hope.

You see it again at the end of the psalm. He says the exact same words. Why are you downcast O my soul? Why disturbed within me? Hope in God I shall praise him the help of my countenance and my God.

You see what he's done by this point? He's blown out all the walls. Remember what's true about the past? Blown that wall out. Remember what's true about God in the present?

Blown that wall out. Remember his promises for the future? Blown that way. He's praying to God that wall is gone too so that the light can stream in. Now let me ask.

Is it easy to do these kinds of things in the midst of depression and despair? No. Now how many times does he have to grab his soul by the scruff of the neck?

[30 : 30] Two different times. It's not like one and done. Right? Verse five, okay, psalm ends here. No. In fact, do you notice what happens between verses eight and nine?

Did this strike you on the way through? Look at verse eight. The Lord will command his loving kindness in the daytime. His song will be with me in the night.

A prayer to the God of my life. It seems as though everything's under control. Very next verse, I will say to God my rock, why have you forgotten me? How is that possible?

If you've experienced deep sadness or despair or depression, you know exactly how that's possible. Isn't it true in the midst of those times our hearts can pinball back and forth a dozen times a day?

Isn't it true you could leave a time of prayer feeling the peace of God and twenty minutes later your heart begins to crumble again? That's exactly what the psalmist is experiencing.

[31 : 42] And so God gives him words to use just for times like that. You know in the midst of those times sometimes sometimes we end up being harder on ourselves than God is.

We end up being harder on ourselves than God is. Sometimes in the midst of those times we say to ourselves with disgust you should have more faith. actually what the Lord does here is he says let me give you words to use when you're feeling like that because that's something that people often experience and you need to know how to pray in the midst of it.

If this is where the psalmist can come to hope has the last word hope has the last word because the psalmist knows the God to whom I pray is a hope giving God and if that's true for the psalmist remember he writes this hundreds of years before Jesus comes hundreds of years before and if the psalmist in the midst of his troubles and trials not even knowing about Jesus can come to a place of hope because he knows God is a God of hope how much more can we today we have something the psalmist didn't have we know that God in his love for us chose to come into the brokenness darkness and despair in human flesh in

Jesus in fact do you remember that when Jesus was on the cross one of the things he prayed was this my God my God finish it for me why have you forsaken me he knows he knows what the person of psalm 42 has gone through because he's experienced it and experienced it even at a level you and I can't begin to imagine which means if you are where the person of psalm 42 was if you're in that situation you can have the greatest hope because you're not alone no matter what you're feeling because Jesus knows and he cares and he loves you and he is a shepherd who's ready to reach down and to hold and to carry you so who is psalm 42 for who's it written for it's not written for those who are strong in faith you're of course welcome to pray it it's not written for those who feel very close to

God you're of course welcome to pray it it's written for those who are very weak in faith in the midst of despair who feel like God is a thousand miles away it's written for those who are on their bedroom floor on their knees with tears streaming down their face who need words to pray that keep them talking to God words to pray that remind them what is true from the past words to pray that remind them what's true about God in the present and words to pray that remind them of God's promises for the future that's who Psalm 42 is for and God has given it to you in his love for you so that you might have those words to pray let me pray together for us oh Lord truly you are the

[35 : 56] Lord of steadfast love I pray for us today I pray especially for those of us whose hearts are downcast or in despair or feeling that you are far away that you would help us to remember what is true and would the truth of who you are provide those touch points of reality to help us in the midst of the storm oh Lord by your spirit in the mercies of Jesus encourage and help and heal we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org