

Singing when the soul is downcast

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[0 : 00] Thank you. Good morning. Has anybody ever been to one of these big theme parks?

Lightwater Valley or Alton Towers or anything like that? Many years ago, before our kids were born, so that's going back a bit, we went to Lightwater Valley. I think it was with the youth. We were taking some of the young people from church and they were all going on all these big rides and things and we were sort of standing there thinking, do we dare to go on this?

It's, I think it was a super loop we ended up going on, it goes round like that. But the worst bit is when you sort of go up that very steep incline and you can see yourself getting to the top and you know any minute you're just going to drop down.

Anybody like those things? Ken does. Why am I not surprised? But this psalm is a bit of, we've been going through a series in the psalms and we're on to Psalm 42 today.

And it's really a bit of a rollercoaster psalm because the writer sort of goes from feeling really down in the dumps to praising God, to calling out to God, to going back to being down in the dumps again.

[1 : 11] So I'm just going to read Psalm 42 for you. I think the words will come up on the screen as well. It says, 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. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men to 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.

[2 : 32] 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 as 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.

So, apparently if you look at this psalm in the original Hebrew, it was written as a longer prayer, including Psalm 43, which obviously comes immediately after it.

But if you have time later, if you go and look at Psalm 43, it uses that same refrain about, why are you downcast, O my soul? And put your hope in God. So, it was probably originally one long prayer, but for various reasons, split into two psalms at some point.

[3 : 50] But we're going to focus on Psalm 42 for today. But if you go and look at Psalm 43, it's similar themes of, you know, where are you, God? What's going on? I will choose to trust you.

It says at the beginning, it's a masker, which I think John mentioned the other week. It's probably a literary or a musical term, possibly a song or poem of contemplation. And it was written for the sons of Korah, who were a branch of the Levites with specific responsibilities in worship.

So, a lot of the psalms we've been looking at have been psalms that David wrote, but this is not by David, but written for the sons of Korah to do the worship. And as you read it, like I said, it can feel a bit like a rollercoaster or a bit chaotic.

The psalmist is really just having a good emotional splurge and letting it all out. He's not sort of really holding back on how he feels, is he? But it moves from expressions of, why, God?

What's going on? You know, why are my enemies against me? To declarations of trust. And then back again. It's an excruciatingly honest psalm.

[5 : 01] But actually, I think it's a really good model for us in personal prayer. You know, if we're not prepared to be honest with God, then it's hard to draw near to him. He knows how we're feeling, but sometimes we want to hide the grotty bits, or I want to hide the grotty bits anyway.

Maybe you're all better expressing yourselves than I am. But we can be tempted to think that we've got to come to God and look all respectable. But the psalmist here is just telling it like it is, but he doesn't stay in that place.

He moves from that place to a place of trust. So we're just going to break down some of the themes in this psalm. So first of all, the psalmist, sorry, next slide please, Josh, is articulating his despair or his discouragement.

I put lots of different words in there. He starts by expressing his longing for God. Now, I didn't tell Michelle what songs to choose this morning, or ask her, but the one we've been singing a couple of songs ago about here I am longing for you really echoes what's going on in this psalm.

And here the psalmist is comparing himself to a deer panting for water. So if you've ever seen a dog on the beach that's been running around and needs a drink, you'll know how they pant. Now imagine a deer, but maybe in the Judean desert, where actually water's really hard to find and you can be really desperate to find that refreshment, that source that will give you life.

[6 : 28] And that's the picture of desperation that we have here. The psalmist comparing himself to somebody who's really desperate, just like the deer, is desperate to find water. As it's already mentioned, we had baptisms on Wednesday night, which was an amazing experience.

I just wanted to pick up on some things that Chris said, because he was talking about how he tried all sorts of different things and different approaches to find fulfillment. And he said that actually, eventually, he found the thing he was, or the person he was looking for, which is Jesus.

It was an amazing testimony. Thank you, Chris, and to the others. But it just reminded me of, you know, lots of people look for lots of different things to fill the gap in their lives, the void in their lives.

They try to fill it with material items, with getting a really fulfilling job, with other religions or belief systems. But we know that it's only God that can really fill that void.

And until we come to God and allow him to satisfy that longing in us, we will be searching and not satisfied. It reminded me of, I'll get a mention of our granddaughter in.

[7 : 41] She's got a shape sorter. Now, as I understand it, the idea of shape sorters is you have lots of different shapes and they all have a particular hole and you can only fit one into a certain hole. But in shape sort.

I think it's the square one seems to go through all the different holes for some reason. But actually, it made me think of, you know, people can have all sorts of different longings but actually it's God that fulfills all of those needs and all of those longings.

C.S. Lewis famously said, if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, so that longing, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

And he was talking about our need for God and the desire and the longing within each of us that is for Jesus. So the psalmist starts by expressing his longing for God but then he goes on to express his sadness.

Talks about, oh, I remember how it used to be and I used to be in the procession going to the temple and leading the singing. This isn't a slight wistfulness for how it used to be, like, you know, I remember back when that was nice, wasn't it?

[8 : 47] It's a real overwhelming grief. I looked at this passage in the New Living Translation as well and it talks there about, he says, my heart is breaking. He's absolutely devastated that he's not in that place at the moment of being in that procession to the temple.

And he talks about his tears being his food day and night. He isn't just having a little sniffle every now and then, he is devastated, he is grieving. And he doesn't hold back from talking to God about his sadness.

He talks, too, about feeling overwhelmed, about the waves and breakers coming over him. Now, it was really nice on Wednesday that it was a sunny evening and the sea was beautifully calm.

I'm sure it was cold still, but it looked better that I have sometimes seen it. But those of you who've been to the beach at all regularly will know that sometimes the wind comes off the sea and the waves are huge and they come crashing over the ends of the pier even and it's quite terrifying if you're out in it.

And those sort of waves and breakers can quickly overwhelm us. And the psalmist is using that image to say, I'm really overwhelmed. It's like these waves crashing over me. He then gets to questioning where God is.

[10 : 10] Why have you forgotten me? Do we ever feel like that? Do we ever feel that God's forgotten us? Do we ever feel that we've been praying maybe for something for a long time and God's not answered and we wonder whether actually we've sort of got a dodgy connection and he's not listening or we've not asked in the right way.

But the psalmist is honest enough to say, why have you forgotten me? Where are you? What are you doing? He also acknowledges his enemies.

He's oppressed by those around him. The notes in my, I've got a study Bible and the notes suggest that he may have been writing from a place of captivity.

He was oppressed by enemies. He couldn't do the things that he wanted to. He couldn't worship him the normal way. Now probably most of us will never be taken into captivity. But we might be oppressed in other ways and we might be attacked by things within us as well.

Those little niggling thoughts that say, you know, is God really real or is God really going to answer that prayer? It might be forms of illness that incapacitate us that are getting in, we're allowed to get in the way of our relationship with God.

[11 : 23] So there are things that can oppress us even if we're not physically taken into captivity. as the psalmist was. But he acknowledges that he has enemies and that everything isn't easy.

He doesn't try and play it down or pretend they don't exist. And again, he comes back to that, where is your God? a phrase that can still be used to tempt us to doubt God.

You know, if you spend any time on Twitter, which I wouldn't necessarily recommend because it's easy to get dragged down all sorts of rabbit holes, but you'll see people saying, well, you know, where was God when this happened? Or if you look at the news, people say, where was God when this happened?

And it's easy to allow those voices to start niggling at us. And it could be an external voice or it might be something inside, maybe when things don't turn out the way that we want them to or we've been asking God for something and he doesn't give it to us.

We can be tempted to doubt God, to say, where is he? And just like Adam and Eve in the garden listen to that voice of, you know, did God really say that? we can start listening to that voice of, you know, is God really there?

[12 : 34] Does he really care about you? And it's really important to recognize and acknowledge when that's happening so that we can be equipped to face it and to deal with it. So, the psalmist spends a lot of time shouting, moaning, just telling God how he feels.

But he also, next slide please, Josh, remembers who God is and at various points in this psalm he goes back to remembering who God is. In verse, I don't know if it's verse 5b or verse 6, so some versions seem to have a verse 6 and some versions seem to have verse 6 mixed out so it's the end of verse 5.

Anyway, after that bit about, you know, why are you downcast in my soul and so on, he goes on to say, therefore I will remember you. And it's almost like, you know, had a word with himself, he's like, you know, actually I am going to remember God.

He's discouraged and in despair but he determines to remember God. Verse 8, he recognises God's presence and his sovereignty.

Talks about his love being with him during the day and his songs at night. He recognises as well in this God's sovereignty because he says it's God who directs his love.

[13 : 55] God isn't passive but God is active in his love. And he also talks about his song is with me. I think Veronica mentioned the other week that fabulous verse in Zephaniah 3:17 that talks about God singing over us.

And it's a beautiful image. You know, we often sing over our children when they're small to help them feel at peace and soothed. And the image in Zephaniah is of God singing over us.

And in the same way here, the psalmist is recognising that God sings over him. God is with him and it speaks of a tender-hearted father.

This is not something that an absent or distant father does but a tender, loving father will sing over his child. So in the midst of all this mess and then remembering who God is, the psalmist has to make a choice and he chooses to trust God.

I'm just going to read verse 5 again which is the one that's repeated at the end and in Psalm 43. It's the bit that says, Why are you downcast, O my soul?

[15 : 08] Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my saviour and my God.

It's a really powerful verse and I think that's why the psalmist keeps coming back to it and those who are using this psalm in worship or to contemplate God would keep coming back to that reminder, you know, let's focus on God, let's trust in him, let's put our hope in him.

The psalmist isn't ignoring his feelings of despair now, he's not saying, oh well, you know, I've had my little rant, I'll forget about those now because we can see later in the psalm he goes back to them. So he doesn't ignore those feelings of despair but he addresses them and almost talks back to himself and saying, you know, why are you feeling so upset, you know, why are you so downcast?

Not in a mean aggressive way but also, you know, here's what you need to do, you need to put your trust in God, you need to hope in him. So rather than just sitting with those feelings of despair and thinking, well, I can't do anything about them, nobody can help me which is really tempting, isn't it?

If you're feeling grotty, sometimes it's really tempting just to sit there and feel sorry for yourself and have a nice sulk. Yeah, perhaps nobody else sulks around here. But yeah, we can be tempted just to sit with that despair but the psalmist doesn't do that, he acknowledges those feelings but then he directs his attention back to God and that can be really hard sometimes when we're feeling sad, we're feeling discouraged, we're feeling that nobody cares about us, it can take a real effort to direct our attention back to God.

[16 : 55] That doesn't mean that everything is suddenly lovely again but it means that we're making an active choice to think about God and to trust in him and particularly for the psalmist he says, you know, put your hope in God.

This is something that he wants to persist in, it's not a quick fix but he is choosing to put his trust in God and to hope in him and as he does this he's journeying towards a position of praise.

If you read it carefully it says I will yet praise him, it doesn't say oh I'm going to sing lots of lively praise songs now because I'm feeling much better but he says I will yet praise you and I think it's likely looking at it that he's actually anticipating being able to praise for future deliverance so when he put his hope in God he was putting his hope in God to deliver him and to help him and he was giving praise for that future deliverance and in that sense it's a real statement of faith here isn't it?

I will yet praise you because I believe that you will deliver me everything's really rubbish at the moment don't like where I am feeling really fed up but I trust you God to deliver me and to bring me to that place where I can praise you again.

It's a bit like in Jonah if you read the book of Jonah we all know about Jonah getting swallowed by the whale and then getting spat out later again and going to Nineveh but actually in chapter 2 it talks about Jonah actually inside the whale and it talks about Jonah or gives Jonah's prayer while he was inside the whale now if I'd been inside that whale my prayer would be please God get me out of here quick but Jonah says I'm not going to read all of it but at the end it says I with shouts of grateful praise will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will make good I will say salvation comes from the Lord and he's already anticipating that God will rescue him even though he's in a really grotty place and he's there because he's done something really dope he's not done what God asked him to and he's ended up in a mess which I'm sure we can all identify with he says I'm going to praise and I'm going to sacrifice to you and he's looking forward to a time when he's going to be able to sacrifice before God again and it's the same attitude that the psalmist has here not that everything is suddenly okay but he's anticipating that God will deliver him because he knows that God is faithful he knows that God looks after his people and he knows that God is the one who rescues us so just looking at some things that we can take away from this psalm it's really important to understand that the Christian life for most of us has different seasons it's perfectly normal to go through ups and downs in our walk with God

[19 : 53] John likes quoting from Pilgrim's Progress a lot and if you read that you'll find that Pilgrim sets out to find the heavenly city but he ends up in all sorts of messes along the way he ends up in the Slough of Despond doesn't it and things like that sorry it's a while since I've read that book but I know that it's not an easy journey it's not suddenly I'm going to go to the heavenly city oh everything's lovely everything's easy quite the contrary really when we choose to follow Jesus we can expect that sometimes life will be difficult because that's how life is but also those periods can draw us closer to God if you look at those who've gone before us so people in the Bible such as Ruth David Paul and many others excuse me you'll see that they went through ups and downs with their walk with God it wasn't that they turned to God and suddenly everything was easy but they had some really difficult periods but they kept on persevering and trusting God and that's why we read about them now because they stuck with God and they followed him we can also take encouragement from more recent saints so people like Corrie Ten Boom sent to a concentration camp for doing what she believed was right before God and even though she trusted God all the time in not every detail of her life she still ended up in that horrible place where her elder sister ended up dying but she still trusted God and God brought her through that period and after the war when she was released she went to spend a lot of time talking to people about God but her life had big ups and downs

William Wilberforce trying to overturn slavery that wasn't an easy journey and there are lots of Christian believers that we can take encouragement from not because they had an amazing wonderful exciting life all the time but because they went through ups and downs just like we do I'd encourage you if you like reading to find biographies of other believers to read because they can really inspire but also comfort us and if we're honest the stories that really get to us are not the stories where people say well I became a Christian and after that everything was absolutely marvellous all the time you know that could get a bit irritating after a while but the ones that inspire us are the ones where people say yes I turned to Jesus and he's amazing he's been with me all the way but actually I've had some real highs but I've had some lows as well and I've really learnt to depend on God and they're the ones that we identify with because that's our experience of life that it has ups and downs it's important that we learn to be honest with God about our feelings it's too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we have to frame our prayers in nice words or make ourselves respectable when we approach God actually it's okay to tell God that we're upset about something or angry or disappointed you know and if you're not sure just go back and read that psalm or dozens of others where the psalmist has a bit of a moan as well as praising God as I said at the beginning

God already knows how we feel he knows what's going on inside we don't have to pretend when something's upset us when we're feeling discouraged God already knows but actually telling him about that helps us to bring that out into the open and ask for his help and suppressing these emotions actually isn't good for us you know pretending that everything's okay particularly trying to pretend to God that everything's okay all the time isn't healthy for us either physically or spiritually we also need to remember what God has done just as the psalmist went back and said actually therefore I will remember you many of you know I work for a debt advice charity which can be really hard I have a colleague who has a jar like a sweetie jar that big on her desk and she calls it her jar of small wins and every time she has a good result for a client so you know they get a debt written off or you know somebody who's chasing the debt agrees to reasonable terms to repay it or whatever she writes it on a post-it note folds it up and puts it into this jar and her jar it's about that big but it is full of little coloured post-it notes and it's her way of being encouraged in the work that she's doing that actually she's making a difference for God but sometimes we can be really forgetful and you know we pray to God about something and he answers and by next week we're thinking about something else it's really important that we remember the things that God has done and that we are specific in that and I think probably sometimes we need to be more diligent at keeping a record of what God has done for us you know maybe writing it on little notes like my colleague does or putting it on the church prayer chain or something like that but keeping a record of what God has done and being specific you know it's easy to say

I'm really thankful that God has saved me but let's be specific about the things that God has done for us we need to choose to put our hope in God that means we need to remember who he is that he is faithful that he is unchanging that his love is constant that he is forgiving we celebrated communion this morning we've been reminded of God's great forgiveness and his love but let's keep reminding ourselves of that so that we can choose to hope in him sometimes saying to God right I'm going to trust you in this can feel a bit like a leap in the dark alright I don't like it when I can't see where I'm going but actually sometimes God asks us to trust us in things where we can't see what's going on but the more we focus on his goodness his character the easier it is to take that step of saying yes I trust in you I will put my hope in you I thought we need to aim for a position of praise because sometimes if people say you just need to praise God and it'll be fine that just feels really difficult if we're not feeling great about life but I think by viewing this as something

I want to get back to that position of praising God that can be a really helpful way to view it because you're giving God permission to move you to that place and I think we can help ourselves as well in this you know if you're struggling to praise look back at those things that God's done for you choose to give thanks because cultivating that attitude of thankfulness brings us more readily to a position of praise sing along with worship songs you know when you're driving along or you're sitting at home you know doesn't matter if you can't sing in tune God doesn't care he's interested in what's in our heart not whether we can sing like an operatic tenor or something but singing along not just listening but actually singing because when we speak out or sing out those words we're actively actively participating in praising God and worshipping him and finally we need to encourage one another listen to one another if somebody says

[27 : 18]

I just want to finish by reading from this book here so this is called Dwelling in the Psalms by a lady called Pat Marsh and basically she's gone through all the Psalms in turn and she's just taken little excerpts but then she's sort of written her own not quite a poem but her own interpretation of it and she's written a prayer based on it I think it's a really helpful book I love this book it's a great one just to dip into to help me sort of slow down and focus on good but on good?

on God but I just want to read from what she's put about Psalm 42 so she starts with the verse about why you're downcast and then this is her response to it waves of sadness wash over me threaten to drown me the joy I once knew is elusive I know not where to turn other than to the God who seems painfully absent I thirst for relief long to know the cool refreshment of running streams to drink deeply of his living waters I despair at the condition of my soul but then I recall times past when praise and thanksgiving were my song and I resolve despite it all in the midst of this utter hopelessness even now

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