

Hope in God  
Psalm 42-43  
 ABC 7/30/23

William Cowper was one of the church's greatest hymn writers & we just sang his most famous one. He also experienced deep depression. The 1<sup>st</sup> attacks of despair struck when he was a young man & he was placed in St. Albans Insane Asylum where he tried to commit suicide many times. One day, a doctor gave him a Bible & he began to read it. In time, he put his faith in Jesus & was saved. A year after his conversion, he left the asylum & met John Newton, who became his pastor & close friend. In spite of his conversion & faith, Cowper still struggled with despair. In the midst of these attacks he learned to pursue God more deeply. Out of these experiences he wrote the song we just sang, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*,<sup>1</sup> which expresses an unwavering trust in God & stands as a testimony to the renewed strength & comfort his troubled heart found in God. I encourage you to go back & slowly read the words of that song. Cowper was a man who experienced great discouragement but learned to hope in God.<sup>2</sup> Even the strongest believers can suffer discouragement & despair. But the trust which Cowper exercised in God steadied his soul & brought him peace. It's this faith in God during times of discouragement that's expressed by the psalmist in Pss 42-43. Yes, we're covering 2 psalms today. Ps 42 is the 1<sup>st</sup> psalm of Book 2 of Psalms & Ps 43 appears to be a continuation, extension, or appendix of Ps 42, as the same, or very similar, refrain is used in both. Ps 42 is identified as a *maskil*, a psalm of instruction. Although the author isn't identified, it was written by one of **the sons of Korah** & was intended **for the choir director**. The **sons of Korah** were Levites, descendants of Korah, & produced & performed music for the worship of God. As we began, listen as I read what RC Sproul wrote about the topic of these psalms:

*The dark night of the soul ... describes a malady that the greatest of Christians have suffered from time to time. It was the malady that provoked David to soak his pillow with tears. It was the malady that earned for Jeremiah the nickname, "The Weeping Prophet." It was the malady that so afflicted Martin Luther that his melancholy threatened to destroy him. This is no ordinary fit of depression, but it is a depression that is linked to a crisis of faith, a crisis that comes when one senses the absence of God or gives rise to a feeling of abandonment by Him.*

---

<sup>1</sup>#88 in our hymnal

<sup>2</sup>To learn more read John Piper's, *The Hidden Smile of God*

*Spiritual depression is real & can be acute.... Our faith is not a constant action. It is mobile. It vacillates. We move from faith to faith, & in between we may have periods of doubt when we cry, "Lord, I believe, help ... my unbelief."*

*We may also think that the dark night of the soul is something completely incompatible with the fruit of the Spirit... Once the Holy Spirit has flooded our hearts with a joy unspeakable, how can there be room in that chamber for such darkness? .... A Christian can have joy in his heart while there is still spiritual depression in his head. The joy that we have sustains us through these dark nights & is not quenched by spiritual depression. The joy of the Christian is one that survives all downturns in life....*

He goes on to say,

*This coexistence of faith & spiritual depression is paralleled in other biblical statements of emotive conditions. We are told that it is perfectly legitimate for believers to suffer grief. Our Lord Himself was a man of sorrows & acquainted with grief. Though grief may reach to the roots of our souls, it must not result in bitterness. Grief is a legitimate emotion, at times even a virtue, but there must be no place in the soul for bitterness. In like manner, we see that it is a good thing to go to the house of mourning, but even in mourning, that low feeling must not give way to hatred. The presence of faith gives no guarantee of the absence of spiritual depression; however, the dark night of the soul always gives way to the brightness of the noonday light of the presence of God.<sup>3</sup>*

With hearing that, let me ask, *How do you respond when the dark nights of the soul comes your way?* We live in a feeling-oriented culture. We hear that *feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are.* We're told we need to get in touch with & accept our feelings. But, as Christians, we need to develop a biblical theology of emotions & measure what the world says by what the Scriptures say. The Bible says we must **discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness** (1 Tim 4:7). Discipline, by definition, means going against our feelings, right? I may not feel like exercising, but if I'm disciplined, I do it anyway. While even the most mature believers are susceptible to depression (Elijah, 1 Kgs 19:1-4; John the Baptist, Mt 11:2-3; Peter, Mt 26:69-75), the Bible is clear we should be marked by joy in the Lord, even in the midst of difficult circumstances (Jn 15:11; Acts 5:41; 16:25; Gal 5:22; Phil 4:4). How do we accomplish this? **Ps 42-43**

**1. Lament #1** (1-4) The psalm begins with a statement of intense longing: **As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God.** This was a time of emotional drought & spiritual dryness for the author. His driving passion wasn't for people, possessions, or prosperity but for God Himself. Like a panting deer in desperate need of water, the psalmist cried, **my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God** (1b-2a). All the hope, trust, & confidence of

<sup>3</sup> [www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/dark-night-soul](http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/dark-night-soul)

the psalmist was in **the living God**. His thirst was for the true God who was self-sufficient, independent, & willing to come to the aid of His people. His desperation is reflected in the question, **When shall I come & appear before God?** (2b). This wasn't a denial of God's omnipresence but a longing for a deeper personal awareness of God as he suffered the loneliness of his alienation & feeling abandoned. His longing for God was intensified by the hostile environment he found himself in created by men who said to him **all day long, 'Where is your God?'** (3). They taunted him to doubt the character of his God. The insult didn't mean that God didn't exist but that God had abandoned the psalmist. It meant, *Where is your God when you need him? I thought God was with you. So where is He now?* The psalmist's desperation was such that he declared, **My tears have been my food day & night** (3a). The persistent mocking caused him such sorrow he lost his appetite. *Why doesn't God seem to hear my cries? Why doesn't He intervene & change my circumstances?* As he reflected on his present circumstances, his mind was drawn to remember better days when he says, **4**.

He remembers the exuberant joy he experienced during the public worship services in Jerusalem when he'd lead the parade to the house of God. These pleasant memories became a source of discouragement in the present for him. He's far from home & feels he's far from God. It isn't that he doesn't believe that God is everywhere, or that God isn't with him. But his being away from home has gotten him down & his absence from Jerusalem was also an absence from his work & his purpose for living<sup>4</sup> which caused him to feel that God is absent.

**2. Refrain #1** (5) The writer doesn't surrender to his discouragement. He's fighting back & questions himself, **Why are you in despair, O my soul? & why have you become disturbed within me?** He challenged himself, bringing him to a place of self-examination about his state of sorrow. He doesn't give in & wrestles with it. He reminds himself of what he knows & finds that *no reasons for being cast down are so strong as those for elation & calm hope*.<sup>5</sup> This self-contemplation moved him to command himself to put his **hope in God**. There is no lasting hope in anything else in this

<sup>4</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106*, pp 367–368

<sup>5</sup>Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol 3, p 304

sinful, fallen world. There never has been & never will be. Although he felt isolated from God, he stirred his mind to override his emotions & feelings by hoping **in God**. He continued, **I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence**. His hope was in the immutability of God's character. Relief from downheartedness is found in trusting the unchangeable character of God. This is a great certainty: God hasn't changed & His purposes haven't changed. Sometimes God lets us have dry times. Theologians of old called it *spiritual desertion*. God never takes His arms out from underneath you, but there are times in which He doesn't let you feel His arms around you. Why? To drive us deeper in longing for Him. That's what the psalmist does.<sup>6</sup>

I love the story about Martin Luther. For several weeks he moped around the house & looked depressed. One day his wife Katie, who was quite the character, dressed all in black. Back then you wore black only when you were going to a funeral. So she comes out in a black dress & Martin says, *Katie, who died?* She said, *God is dead*. He asked, *What do you mean?* She said, *I've been watching you the last few weeks. It must only mean that you believe God is dead. By your attitude around the house, God is dead.*

That shook him to the core. It's said he wrote a single Latin word meaning *He lives*, & placed it in his study, so every day he'd walk by it & be reminded of the truth that God lives.<sup>7</sup>

That's what the psalmist does here. He commands himself to continue to put his **hope in God**.

**3. Lament #2** (6–10) The psalmist continues to look inward & says his soul was **in despair within** him. He recalled the times of worshiping the Lord while in Jerusalem. He wrote, **I remember You from the land of the Jordan**. This refers to the region NE of Jerusalem where Mount Hermon was located. It's further described as **from Mount Mizar**, meaning *little hill* or *mountain* & was probably a lesser peak in that range. The psalmist was in the outer edges of his homeland, away from the comforts, conveniences, & community of home. He continues, **deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls** (7). This pictures one wave calling out to another to coordinate a conspiracy to overwhelm him. **All your breakers & Your waves have rolled over me**. Like a shipwrecked sailor clinging to a piece of driftwood in a raging storm, he was tossed back & forth, taking on water, sinking fast with no hope of rescue. The **waterfalls, breakers, & waves** that overwhelmed the author show his mounting despair. But he knows they were directed by the Lord. They were under His

<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*, Logos, *Losing & Finding God*, 8/17/97

<sup>7</sup> Told by Skip Heitzig, <https://sermons.love/skip-heitzig/13132-skip-heitzig-radioactive-psalms-42-43.html>

complete control & were working for his good. They were Your waterfalls, Your breakers, & Your waves. Although this son of Korah was overwhelmed by his situation, he could still say that the Lord commanded **His lovingkindness** toward him (8). This love was the unconditional, covenant lovingkindness of God for His people. He knew the love of God wouldn't fail him. **In the night**, the psalmist said, God's **song** was with him. For some reason, nights can be the hardest. But he knows **His song will be with me in the night**. When his troubles woke him he was comforted by the knowledge of God's love. There was never a time when God wasn't with the psalmist, although he didn't always feel the presence of God. He continued to offer a **prayer to the God of his life** because God hears the cries of His people & never turns a deaf ear to them. The Lord of heaven & earth invites you into His presence to bring your cries before Him. At times we have to remind ourselves that we have access to God, the ultimate source of wisdom, power, & grace. We have access to the God who rules everything. He is our Father & He welcomes us into His presence. He hears & responds. No matter how weak our cry is, no matter how riddled with doubt it is, no matter how faint it is, He hears & He will answer. In vs 9 he reminds himself that God is his **rock**. He knew God was a stable **rock** in which he could find solid footing from the crashing waves. Remember, in vs 1, God appears to be absent. In vs 9, God is his **rock**. By the time we come to Ps 43:2, God is his **strength**. He asks, **Why have You forgotten me?** (9) because God wasn't coming to his aid immediately. God hadn't forgotten him, it just felt that way. It's easy, when darkness comes, to think that somehow God has changed, His promises have changed, & He's moved on but He hasn't. My grandson, George, likes playing *dark closet*. I asked the same question, *What's that?* You go into the darkest closet in the house, shut the door, & play with a flashlight. It's great fun. You should try it. What's my point? You're shut up in the closet & there is no light. You're surrounded by darkness. But the reality you left is still reality. The lights are on in the house & the sun still shines outside. You just happen to be in a place of darkness. It would be wrong to panic in the closet & say, *The light is gone!* No, the light still shines. But it appeared God wasn't listening & didn't care. The psalmist's prayers seemed to be going unheard & unanswered. He was in a dark closet. He asks himself, **Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?** (9). He was

emotionally devastated & distraught by the taunting enemies of His God. This oppression affected him physically. **As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me** (10). The physical pain was caused by the relentless attacks of his foes. Although they didn't use sword or spear, their taunting was still hurtful. The specific taunt launched was again, **Where is your God?** To the dismay of the psalmist, this was said **all day long**.

**4. Refrain #2** (11) In the face of this adversity, the psalmist continues to talk to himself. He repeats vs 5, asking, **Why are you in despair, O my soul? & why have you become disturbed within me?** He answers by preaching to himself, *Put your hope in God*. He encouraged his heart to trust God, to **hope in God** with the expectation that He'd come through for him, that God would work for his good with perfect wisdom, perfect plans, perfect timing, & perfect power. While hoping in **God**, he'd also **praise Him** for who He is, what He had done, what He was doing, & what He would do.

**5. Lament #3** In Ps 42, the psalmist found himself in difficult times. His storm showed no sign of lifting, so in Ps 43 he continues to seek God in prayer. Using courtroom language, he called out to God, **Vindicate me, O God, & plead my case against an ungodly nation** (1). He wanted God to be both his Judge, examining him, & his defense Counsel, defending him against an **ungodly nation** that threatened him. He asks God to plead his cause before them. He wanted God to **deliver** him from the **deceitful & unjust** people who threatened his life. With growing confidence, he boasts, **You are the God of my strength** (2), the One who could defend him from all attacks. Nevertheless, as his enemies seemed to be gaining an advantage over him, the situation gave the appearance that God had rejected him (2). If God was his sure defense, he wondered, **Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?** (9). Seemingly, God had rejected him, but He hadn't. God's vindication of the psalmist would be seen in the Lord's guidance, which would usher him to Jerusalem to worship. He prayed, **Send out Your light & Your truth, let them lead me ... to your holy hill** (3), referring to Jerusalem, the place of public worship. Personified as the psalmist's personal guide, God's **light** was the divine illumination necessary for a person to understand His **truth**. In other words, a God-given understanding of God's Word would lead him back to worship in Jerusalem. The psalmist needed the providential care of God to overturn circumstances before he

could go back to Jerusalem. But once he got back, he pledged he'd go **to the altar of God**, who was his **exceeding joy**, the satisfaction of his soul. There he would **praise** God with **the lyre** or harp.

**6. Refrain #3** (5) Repeating the familiar refrain he again searched & asked himself, **Why are you in despair, O my soul? & why are disturbed within me?** He wondered how he could be so distraught if God was so great. He again commanded himself, *put your hope in God*. Have confidence in Him. Trust Him. Don't focus on the enemies, but look upward to God. With a firm resolve, he determined he'd praise the Lord who alone was his Savior & God. He's aggressive in confronting himself to deal with his despair so he can regain a sense of God's presence. He can't change his circumstances, but he can change his focus from himself & his situation to God. By the end of the psalm, his circumstances haven't changed, but his attitude has, because he's deliberately focused on the Lord. When drowning in discouragement, there's a simple but sure remedy for *the dark nights of our souls*. The cure is always to hope in God exclusively, knowing He'll never fail. Speaking to this, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his book, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes & Cure*, wrote:

*The ultimate cause of all spiritual depression is unbelief. For if it were not for unbelief, even the devil could do nothing. It is because we listen to the devil instead of listening to God that we go down before him & fall before his attacks. That is why this psalmist keeps saying to himself: **Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him....** He reminds himself of God. Why? Because he was depressed & had forgotten God, so that his **faith** & his belief in God & in God's power, & in his relationship to God, were not what they ought to be.... Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?... Now this man's treatment was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. **Why are you in despair, O my soul?** he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up & says: "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you."*

*You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: **Why are you in despair?**—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, & say to yourself: **Hope in God**—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way.<sup>8</sup>*

On this side of the cross, we know the greatest ground for our hope: Jesus Christ crucified for our sins & triumphant over death. So the main thing we must learn is to preach the gospel to ourselves.

**If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom 8:31–35).**

<sup>8</sup>Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, pp 20-21

Learn to preach the gospel to yourself. Learning to respond biblically to trials is one of the most crucial lessons you can learn as a Christian. God has given us the resources to be overwhelming conquerors in even the most desperate situations (Rom 8:35-37). Living by faith means choosing to believe God & His Word rather than circumstances. It's important to note that in these psalms there's no mention of the author sinning & bringing God's chastisement on him. In Pss 32, 38, & 51, David's distress was due to his sin. If we're aware of disobedience to the Lord, we need to confess it, turn from it, & receive His cleansing & forgiveness. If we're not aware of any sin, we need to be careful to continue walking uprightly before the Lord & not give in to the temptation to rail against Him in our time of trial. There's a difference between complaining to the Lord in a submissive manner & shaking your fist in His face. The psalmist doesn't mention any sin on his part. He's confused & feels as if God has rejected him & he tells God those feelings. But it's also clear he'd taken a stand by testifying to his enemies that the Lord was his God. They were throwing it back in his face, asking, **Where is your God?** This added to his despair, because he didn't want to bring reproach to the name of the Lord. He wants to follow God's light & truth (43:3). In the midst of life's troubles, we must direct our heart toward God & anchor our soul in Him. Unwavering hope must be placed in God, regardless of our circumstances. To do this, we must commit ourselves to exercise confident faith in God. The unchanging character of God should be a comfort to us no matter our circumstances. God alone is the Savior & Sustainer of His people. He alone can rescue us from our darkest trials & troubles. We must see the dark days as an opportunity to seek God & grow in Him. Don't just try for quick relief. Though the psalmist was in pain, he realized his real need was God (42:1-2, 5-6, 11; 43:4-5). In fact, he begins this psalm by recognizing that above all else. He knew God personally before this trial hit. Note how he calls God **my God** (42:6, 11; 43:4, 5); **the God of my life** (42:8); **my rock** (42:9); **the God of my strength** (43:2); & **God my exceeding joy** (43:4). This tells us that the godly can be discouraged. But it also tells us that the time to prepare for crises is before they hit. The psalmist had spent time with God before & knew Him as his God. Therefore, he had a refuge, a rock, a relationship to turn to in his time of despair.

We all must learn to...



1) Seek the person of God. The psalmist's thirst for God seems to grow in intensity throughout these psalms. Matthew Henry says the psalmist thirsts *for nothing more than God, but still for more & more of Him*.<sup>9</sup> Dark nights can either whet or dull our thirst for God. God allows suffering to drive us closer in dependence upon Him. The need for the discouraged person is reality with the living God. We are to hope in Him, He is our help.

2) Seek the presence of God. The psalmist wanted to appear before God (42:2), to know the help of His presence (42:5). God sometimes shows us our need for Him by depriving us of the sense of His presence & help, so that we'll seek Him all the more. The thirst for God when He appears to be absent is a sure sign that we are His children.

3) Seek the praise of God. When you're distressed in the darkness, sometimes the last thing you feel like doing is praising the Lord. But praise is a command not a feeling. If we obey, we often feel better. The song drives the darkness away. To praise God is to focus on His attributes & actions. As we deliberately direct our thoughts to His saving grace toward us in Jesus, our spirits will be lifted.

4) Seek the precepts of God. God's light & truth from His Word show us the way back. Again, even if you don't feel like it, be disciplined & read God's Word & ask His Spirit to shine His light into your discouraged soul. God's truth will lead you to His dwelling place where you'll find God Himself to be your exceeding joy (43:3-4).

5) Seek God with the people of God. The psalmist seems isolated in his depression, which is often the case. But he realizes the place of joy where the need of his soul would be met is in corporate worship with God's people. When you're down, you often want to avoid people, especially gathering with God's people. But that's what you need. Go against your feelings & force yourself to gather with God's people to seek Him.

The psalmist's running refrain (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5) corresponds to Jesus's Gethsemane experience, where He was **very distressed & troubled**. He said to His disciples, **My soul is deeply grieved to the**

---

<sup>9</sup>[www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/psalms/42.html](http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/psalms/42.html)

**point of death** (Mk 14:33–34). We'd be naive to think that these emotions had no correlation in the psalms. These are the emotions of the One who came **to give His life a ransom for many** (Mk 10:45). These psalms are the narrative of the Lord Jesus. On the cross, He cried, **I thirst** (Jn19:28), parched, weak, & alone. On the cross, perhaps His mind went to that celebration the week before, as He came triumphantly & palm branches were placed before Him & **Hosanna** sung to Him (Mt 21:9). Not now. What He heard now were the taunts of His enemies, **Let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him** (Mt 27:43). He faced separation from God, not just feeling that God wasn't near but actual separation from God as God turned His back on His own Son. & He did that for us as He bore our sin, crying out, **My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?** (Mt 27:46). Our Savior understands what you're going through because He went through it too. But what He did was a substitution. He went through all of that so that God would never turn His back on you, so that God would never forsake you, so that you'd be guaranteed peace & rest forever. In the dark night, there is hope because there is Jesus. Jesus is our hope!

Is God Himself your **exceeding joy** today (43:4)? If not, don't rest until it's true. Your need isn't happiness; your need isn't relief from pain; your need is Jesus. Thirst after Him. Rouse yourself to seek Him as your only source of hope & help, no matter how despairing your circumstances. Hope in God! You shall again praise Him, because He is the help of your countenance & He is your God.