



Text: Psalm 42¹

Title: Dealing with Spiritual Depression – How to fight for hope

Date: April 11, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

Since October we've been working our way off and on through Paul's First Letter to Timothy. As you'll note in the bulletin I've been working on 1 Timothy 4, verses 1 to 10 this past week in preparation for today and as I worked through the passage one verse in particular caught my attention.

In this portion of his letter to Timothy, Paul challenged Timothy to avoid the spiritual dead-end of false teaching by taking serious, intentional steps toward godly thinking and living. He exhorted Timothy to...

“train yourself for godliness” 1 Timothy 4:7

The word that Paul used emphasized the fact that “training in godliness” was tough work and it would take great effort on Timothy's part to accomplish the needed training. To encourage Timothy along, Paul shared his own source of motivation. Godliness was Paul's goal in life, as well, and so he wrote...

“For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” 1 Timothy 4:10

“Train,” “toil,” and “strive” ... Christian life and service is hard work! The word “strive” is a translation of the Greek word from which we derive our word, “agony.” Christian life and service is serious work. It takes its toll on human resolve and strength. What keeps us in the race, what keeps us moving forward is hope, hope in the living God! But hope doesn't come cheaply. Hope doesn't often fall into our laps. Many times in our lives, if we want hope we have to fight for it, and that is what I want to talk with you about this morning. I want to talk with you about **Fighting for Hope!** I want us to “set our hope on the living God.” This week I came across some thoughts about fighting for hope that were penned by Pastor John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, that have helped me immensely in my battle for hope and the bulk of what I'm about to share you with comes from that sermon.²

I'm going to jump backwards in the Bible this morning to a passage that speaks to setting our hope in God during those times in our lives when hope seems

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² The bulk of this sermon was written by John Piper, June 1, 2008, and was originally entitled, “Spiritual Depression in the Psalms,” © Desiring God. www.desiringGod.org.



beyond our grasp. It's a familiar psalm that I'm sure that was on Paul's heart when he wrote this word of testimony to Timothy and it's one that I know is familiar to many of you this morning. I'm reading **The Forty Second Psalm** this morning...

To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

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 all the day long, "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. (Psalm 42:1-4)

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 Mizar. 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 all the day long, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:5-10)

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. (Psalm 42:11)

Do you catch the feeling that the author of this psalm is fighting for hope? He is. His soul is "cast down." He is in internal "turmoil." He is constantly weeping. He is longing for days gone by. One of the most prominent emotional conditions in the Psalms is spiritual depression. In fact, the British pastor and writer, Martyn-Lloyd Jones, wrote a book entitled *Spiritual Depression* and he based it on Psalm 42.

I want to draw your attention to the heading of the psalm, a portion we regularly ignore when we read and study the psalms, but it contains some key information. First of all, notice that this psalm was written by "the Sons of Korah." They were a group of priests who were charged with the ministry of singing in the temple in Jerusalem. 2 Chronicles chapter 20 verse 19 describes them in action...

"the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice." 2 Chronicles 20:19



The heading implies that this psalm was probably used in public worship and was sung. That's important for us to note. The psalms were not usually read as they are today; they were sung in worship, just as we sang songs of praise and longing to God a few minutes ago. The psalms are songs. They are poems. They are written to awaken, express and shape the emotional life of God's people. Poetry and singing exists because God made us with emotions, not just thoughts. Our emotions are massively important.

The second thing to notice in the heading is that the psalm is called a "maskil." It's not clear what the word means. That's why most versions don't translate it. It comes from a Hebrew word that means *to make someone wise* or *to instruct*. So when applied to psalms, it may mean *a song that instructs* or *a song that is wisely crafted*. The psalms gave expression to emotions but they also instructed God's people. In this case, Psalm 42 gives us instruction on how to deal with our emotions.

The psalms in our Bible were inspired by God. They intend to shape what the mind thinks, and they intend to shape what the heart feels. When we immerse ourselves in them, we are "thinking and feeling with God." Hold onto that thought! God cares for how we feel and what we think and He wants us to yoke with His heart and mind and learn from Him. (cf. Matthew 11:29-30) And that's what we do when we bend our hearts and minds to the Psalms.

What I'd like to do with Psalm 42 is give an overview and then show you six things that this psalm instructs us to do when we face spiritual depression – six things that I think are meant to shape how we deal with our own seasons of darkness.

Here's the overview. Externally the writer's circumstances are oppressing. Verse 3 says that his enemies "say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" And verse 10 says the same things, only it describes the effect as a deadly wound: "As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" And the taunt, "Where is your God?" implies that something else has gone wrong, too, or they wouldn't be saying, "Where is your God?" It looks to them like he has been abandoned.

The internal emotional condition of the psalmist is depressed and full of turmoil. In verses 5 and 11, he describes himself as "cast down" and "in turmoil." In verse 3 he says, "My tears have been my food day and night." So he is discouraged to the point of crying day and night. In verse 7 he says that it feels like drowning: "All your breakers and your waves have gone over me."

In all of this, he is fighting for hope. Verse 5: "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." Verse 11: "Why are 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.” He is not surrendering to the emotions of discouragement. He is fighting back.

His external circumstances are oppressing. His internal emotional condition is depressed and full of turmoil. But he is fighting for hope. And the really remarkable thing is that at the end of the psalm, he is fighting but not yet where he wants to be. That last words of the psalm – and the last words of the next psalm (Psalm 43) – are “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.” He leaves us still fighting for the joyful experience of hope and freedom from turmoil. He is not yet praising the way he wants to.

It is a happy ending? Like almost everything else in life, it’s mixed. His faith really is amazing, and his fight is valiant. But he is not where he wants to be in hope and peace and praise.

So I assume this psalm is in the Bible by God’s design and that if we listen carefully, if we watch this psalmist struggle, if we meditate on this instruction day and night, our thoughts about God and life, on the one hand, and our emotions, on the other hand, will be shaped by God. And we will become like a tree that bears fruit and whose leaves don’t wither when the droughts of oppression and discouragement and turmoil comes.

So here are the six ways that this psalmist responds to the discouragement and turmoil that has come with the taunts of his enemies. I’ll put them in an order that they might have happened, though they surely overlap and repeat themselves.

First...

He asks God, “Why?”

He responds to his circumstances at one point by turning to God with a question...

“I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” Psalm 42:9

The word *forgotten* is an overstatement. And he knows it is. He has just said...

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8

What he means is that, it looks like God has forgotten him. It feels as if God has forgotten him. It’s a statement of feeling, not fact, and he knows it! If God hasn’t forgotten him, why aren’t these enemies driven back and consumed? It would be good if all of us were so composed and careful in the expression of our



discouragements that we never said anything amiss. But that is not the way we are. In the midst of the tumult of emotions, we are not careful with our words.

The Bible is so aware of our frailty; it is so honest about the weakness of our hearts, of our wills and our minds. The man of pain, Job, says to his critical friends...

“Do you think that you can reprove words, when the speech of a despairing man is wind?” Job 6:26

In other words, don't jump on the words of a despairing man. Let it go! There will be ample time to discern the deeper convictions of the heart. Let the wind blow them away. They are words for the wind.

So the psalmist asks, *Why?* It's a legitimate question. He may not have asked the question with theological and linguistic precision, but if he proves in time that he did not mean that God had forgotten him, we will let that be words for the wind.

Secondly...

He affirms God's sovereign love

In the midst of his discouragement he affirms God's sovereign love for him.

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8

In verses 5 and 11, he calls God “my salvation and my God.” And even though he says it looks as if God has forgotten him, he never stops believing in the absolute sovereignty of God over all his adversity. So at the end of verse 7, he says...

“all *your* breakers and *your* waves have gone over me.” Psalm 42:7

In other words, all his crashing and tumultuous and oppressing and discouraging circumstances are the waves of God. He never loses this grip on the great truths about God. They are the ballast in his little boat of faith. They keep him from capsizing in the tumult of his emotions. O how many of you have learned this more deeply than I because of the waves that have broken over your lives. You have learned deeply that it is no relief to say that God does not rule the wind and the waves. God doesn't only pick up shipwrecks along the shore; he's out in the midst of the storm riding it with us. He's not only the God of the shoreline; he's the God of the storm, too!



Joni Eareckson Tada is a Christian woman who has learned how to fight for hope. In her teens a diving accident rendered her a paraplegic. That moment stole away her future. But instead of being angry and bitter, today she is joyful – why? She was asked recently in an interview what one book she wished everyone would read. I was surprised by her answer. This is the book she recommends: “The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination” by Lorraine Boettner and this is her explanation of why:

“The language is a little arcane (ie. hard to understand), but Dr. Boettner paints a breathtaking picture of how awesome – and extensive – God’s sovereignty is. I read it when I first got out of the hospital after my accident, and it proved to be a great comfort. It helped to know that despite my accident, **God had not taken His hands off my life for a nanosecond.**”

The dramatic change in her life had not been caused because God had blinked or lost his concentration for a moment; the “waves and breakers” that had submerged Joni and changed her life were God’s “waves and breakers.” Think of the alternatives – do we have a God who looks on with doe-eyed, impotent compassion as the tragedies of our lives unfold or do we have a God who looks on with deep compassion and a good and sovereign plan for our lives that includes the hardship we face?

So the psalmist affirms God’s sovereign love for him in and through all the troubles.

Thirdly...

He sings!

He sings to the Lord at night, pleading for his life...

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8

This is not a song of jubilant hope. He doesn’t feel jubilant hope. He is seeking jubilant hope. This is a prayer song and pleading song – a song “to the God of my life.” That is, a song pleading for his life!

But isn’t it amazing that he is singing his prayer! My guess is that this is where Psalm 42 came from. This very psalm may be that night-time prayer-song. Not many of us can compose songs when we are discouraged and weeping day and night. That’s why a hymnbook with the whole array of emotions is a good thing to keep around. For example, the hymnwriter, Isaac Watts, wrote these pleading words to be sung...

***How long wilt Thou conceal Thy face?
My God, how long delay?***



***When shall I feel those heav'nly rays
That chase my fears away?***

***How long shall my poor labouring soul
Wrestle and toil in vain?
Thy word can all my foes control
And ease my raging pain.***

And these pleading words, based on Psalm 13,

***How long wilt Thou for-get me,
O Lord, Thou God of grace?
How long shall fears be-set me,
While dark-ness hides Thy face?
How long shall griefs dis-tress me
And turn my day to night?
How long shall foes op-press me
And tri-umph in their might?***

***O Lord my God, be-hold me,
And hear my ear-nest cries;
Lest sleep of death en-fold me,
En-light-en Thou mine eyes;
Lest now my foe in-sult-ing
Should boast of his suc-cess,
And en-e-mies ex-ult-ing
Re-joice in my dis-tress.***

***But I with ex-pec-ta-tion
Have on Thy grace re-lied;
My heart in Thy sal-va-tion
Shall still with joy con-fide;
And I with voice of sing-ing
Will praise the Lord a-bove,
Who, rich-est boun-ties bring-ing,
Has dealt with me in love.***

These are honest songs! I'm so glad that there is a Bible-based vocabulary for expressing our pain, our confusion and our pleading to God. These are not pleasant words, but they are songs of faith. And they are shaped by thinking and feeling with God in the Psalms.

Fourthly...

He preaches to his own soul



“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.” Psalm 42:5

O how crucial this is in the fight of faith. We must learn to preach the truth to ourselves. Listen to Lloyd-Jones take on this verse...

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourselves instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. “Why are thou cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says, “Self, listen for a moment; I will speak to you.” (Spiritual Depression, p. 20-21)

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

Listen, self: If God is for you, who can be against you? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for you, how will he not also with him graciously give you all things? Who shall bring any charge against you as God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for you. Who shall separate you from the love of Christ? (Romans 8:31-34 paraphrased)

Learn to preach the gospel to yourself. If this psalmist were living after Christ, that is exactly what he would have done!

Fifth...

He remembers his past

He calls past experiences to mind. He remembers times of worship in the temple with the people of 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.” Psalm 42:4

O how much could be said here about the importance of public worship in our lives. Don't take these times together lightly. What we do here is a real



transaction with the living God. God means for these encounters with him in public worship to preserve our faith now and in the way you remember them later. If public worship were not a real supernatural work of God, it would be pure sentimentalism for the psalmist to remember his experiences. He is not engaging in nostalgia. He is confirming his faith in the midst of turmoil and discouragement by remembering how real God was in corporate worship.

Years ago I had a university professor who was quite cynical about matters of faith. Sadly, he had once been an active Christian, involved in ministry in his church. A fellow student knew of his past and during a discussion about the importance and reality of faith, my friend challenged this professor to recall the evidence he'd seen of the reality of faith during public worship. I watched as this cynical man's face changed; tears began to form. He knew! He'd experienced the presence of God in worship.

People, there is so much at stake when we gather for worship!

Finally...

He thirsts for God!

The writer thirsts for God like a deer thirsts for water.

“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?” Psalm 42:1-2

What makes this so beautiful and so crucial for us, is that he is not thirsting mainly for relief from his threatening circumstances. He is not mainly thirsting for escape from his enemies or their destruction.

It's not wrong to want relief and to pray for it. It is sometimes right to pray for the defeat of enemies. But more important than any of that is God himself. When we think and feel with God in the Psalms, this is the main result: We come to love God and we want to see God and be with God and be satisfied in admiring and exulting in God.

The margin of my Bible contains this very possible translation for verse 2...

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and see the face of God?” Psalm 42:2

The final answer to that question was given in the New Testament. Jesus said...

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” John 14:9



And Paul, a man whose hope was set on the living God, said that when we come to know Jesus Christ for who he truly is, we see...

**“the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” 2
Corinthians 4:4**

When we see the face of Christ, we see the face of God. And we see the glory of his face when we hear the story of the gospel of his death and resurrection.

May the Lord increase your hunger and your thirst to see the face of God. And may he grant your desire through the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

- ❖ **Invitation to prayer ministry**
- ❖ **Final Song:** Jesus, My Only Hope
- ❖ **Benediction**