

## Case Study 2 – Praying When Downcast

Psalm 42-43

### 1. Introduction

- **Prayer and resilience**

Building healthier habits in the discipline of prayer is challenging yet vital for developing resilience in ministry leadership. Some of us will know intuitively what the Puritan named Thomas Goodwin wrote –

*Our fallen nature is allergic to God and never wants us to get too close to him. Thus our fallen nature constantly pulls us away from prayer.*

However prayer (or depending on God) is at the heart of our vocation. As Eugene Peterson reminds us in his book Working The Angles -

*The pastoral work...begins in prayer. Anything creative, anything powerful, anything biblical, insofar as we are participants in it, originates in prayer. Pastors who imitate the preaching and moral action of the prophets without also imitating the prophets' deep praying and worship so evident in the Psalms are an embarrassment to the faith and an encumbrance to the church.*

We each therefore need to have healthy, life-giving patterns of engaging with God on a daily basis. We need to make time to intentionally listen to him and speak to him, notwithstanding all the pressing pastoral demands and the expectations we face or our own sinful tendency to minister in our own strength and wisdom. It is far too easy to become distracted and diverted from what is essential and lies at the heart of our work.

- **Praying the Psalms**

For a number of years now I have tried to pray the Psalms on a systematic basis. I read through the Psalms twice a year in my morning devotions. The challenge for me in this regard (as indeed with the Daily Office) is to not just read unthinkingly in order to tick off the fact that I have done it. I have had to learn to slow down, to meditate and reflect. I therefore want to encourage you to also learn

to read the Psalms in order to begin praying them for they minister to every conceivable human emotion.

- **Introducing Psalms 42-43**

For example Psalms 42-43 is a single close-knit poem or lament hymn which we can pray in a number of situations. The song is beautifully constructed and comprises three stanzas with matching sections which conclude with the repeated chorus –

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

We do not know the author nor do we really know the context. It is believed it was composed by someone in the midst of depression, an experience not uncommon among Christian leaders. Perhaps the composer is in exile, cut off from the city and people of God. But his outward loss has provoked his inner crisis, with which many in different circumstances, including us, can identify. What do we therefore learn about praying when we feel downcast, dispirited, disheartened and discouraged either personally or in our ministries?

### 2. Express Our Feelings

In the three parts of the poem the Psalmist gives three pictures of his spiritual state which are worth pondering.

- **I am parched (42:1-3)**

He commences by likening his parched or dry spiritual state to the agony of a drought stricken animal in a dry river bed longing for non-existent refreshment which only ever came in the Palestinian winter when the rains finally came -

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.*

God seems inaccessible even as he pours out his heart with many tears *day and night*, feeling acutely the taunts of those who say to him continually *where is your God?* These words bite because they

verbalise the very questions he has been asking himself: Does God care? Is God powerless? Where is he in my plight?

• ***I am overwhelmed (42:6-7, 9-10)***

The picture which dominates the second stanza is very different. He sees himself in the extreme north of Israel where in winter the rains cascade down the hillside of Hermon and feed the waterfalls near the Jordan headwaters -

*Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.*

He feels overwhelmed, crushed and drowning with a desperate need to hold on to something, a rock to cling to, to save him from the flood. In an illustration he would never be able to understand or even comprehend he feels like some of us might have felt when caught in dumper after dumper in heavy Australian surf and we feel very glad to have our board strapped to our wrist or ankle.

This metaphor is evocative of times in our lives when everything just gets on top of us. Sometimes it is simply self-inflicted when we have taken on more than we can cope with. No wonder he cries out to God the Rock even though he feels he is absent. No wonder he says –

*'Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?'*

• ***I am misjudged (43:1-2)***

In the third stanza the attacks of his opponents already referred to in the previous two stanzas take centre stage -

*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause  
against an ungodly people;  
from those who are deceitful and unjust  
deliver me!  
For you are the God in whom I take refuge;  
why have you cast me off?*

Using words from the law court, he pleads for justice because he feels thoroughly disheartened by the way he has been let down by others who should have known better. In this context the *ungodly* are those who lack the love which is the mark of the covenant people of God. This Psalmist may well have been in the classic position of a Jeremiah or Job who were attacked in God's name by God's servants or their own friends. In this situation he feels he has come to hide in God, but the Lord has shut the door and left him outside

We can learn from his example in these parts of the prayer because he is ruthlessly honest with himself about his negative feelings. He admits unpleasant things about himself to himself and to God. In our culture it would take real courage for a man to admit to anyone *my tears have been my food day and night*. Notice he is also

prepared to ask God 'why?' repeatedly (42:9, 43:2), getting his feelings about being let down by God off his chest. God can handle the honesty of his children. He is big enough to take it and loving enough to absorb it. Moreover it is in our best interests to do it.

From one point of view the theme of this Psalm is depression. In fact Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote a classic book entitled Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures in which he used this Psalm in particular. In that regard one old explanation of depression is that it involves anger turned inwards against oneself. It is not healthy to repress anger. Some people actually slide further into depression because they allow their minds to dwell on past injustices or failures with the hurt multiplying into destructive bitterness and resentment. It is far better to admit the problem to God in prayer. As the New Testament wisely says in Ephesians 4:26-27 -

*In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down  
while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a  
foothold.*

It is therefore best to keep short accounts with God, expressing our feelings to him in prayer and confession before we go to sleep each

night. Of course, in so far as it is possible, we should be reconciled to others on a daily basis as well.

### 3. Make Ourselves Think

Although the Psalmist expresses himself frankly, he knows when enough is enough, so in each stanza he deliberately turns his mind away from his distress and instead makes himself think about other realities to regain proper focus.

- **Corporate worship in the past (42:4)**

He deliberately recalls his past involvement in leadership of worship at God's place with God's people. He remembers the wondrous joy and ecstatic praise as they commemorated the acts of God in the exodus events and in the covenant with his redeemed people -

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

The question 'where is your God?' verbalised by those who taunt him and mock him receives its answer in this objective reminder of God's salvation which is the focus of his past worship.

- **Personal experience of God's grace (42:8)**

In the second stanza this remembering is further developed as he recalls his personal enjoyment of God's love, his personal life of praise and prayer, and the fact that God was 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.*

It is important to note the tenses are imperfect in this verse and refer to the past. He recalls past blessings. His memory of the daily goodness of God in the past stimulates his prayer in the present that God may return to him and it begins to help him believe that he could experience such happiness again. Counting past blessings is therapeutic. In fact clear thinking reminds him that in the old days

the Lord's care was his night and day experience rather than his present tears. A God so constant cannot have changed.

- **Renewed praise in the future (43:3-4)**

In the third stanza the Psalmist begins to contemplate the future and anticipate renewed praise in God's place in the future, but in order for that to happen he realises God has to bring him back –

*O send out your light and your truth;  
let them lead me;  
let them bring me to your holy hill  
and to your dwelling.*

He looks forward to being liberated from bondage and being escorted to the place of God's presence by God's own guides (*light* and *truth*). He did not know it, but he was effectively praying for the fulfilment of this in the coming of Jesus.

When downcast we need to honestly express our feelings to God in prayer and then deliberately with his help recall all he has done for us in Christ in the past and what he continues to do by His Spirit in the present. We need to let ourselves go, make ourselves think and pull ourselves together.

### 4. Argue With Ourselves

The third element in each stanza is the chorus or refrain where the Psalmist exhorts himself to let his awareness of the past and his hope for the future determine his attitude in the present. He argues with himself and pulls himself together effectively saying:

*Why should I be laid low and groan in distress? I  
must wait for God.*

Waiting for God is looking expectantly for God to act. It is optimistic faith which leads to renewed praise of his help or *my Saviour* God. Many laments in the Psalms transition to praise before they finish. Faith makes it possible to say thank you before one experiences the answer. If we can start praising God even in trouble, and not just when it is past, then we will find the trouble itself is transformed, or rather we are transformed in the trouble.

In summary he talks himself into an attitude of hope and praise three times as he keeps fighting with his inner conflicts.

If we are to model our praying on this Psalm we will learn to argue with ourselves in our prayers. I am a compulsive talker and though I have many sensible conversations with myself, talking to oneself is sometimes regarded as a sign of madness. But it is a common practice. I really enjoyed watching the Australian Open Tennis this year and especially seeing Roger Federer triumph over his great nemesis Rafael Nadal.

If you ever watch professional tennis on television you will realise that talking to oneself is a strategy used by some players to keep focused. I always remember the now retired Lleyton Hewitt's famous or infamous C'mon!

When downcast, disheartened or depressed talking to oneself is actually a therapy to keep you sane. The greatest danger when flat (as we saw in the Elijah story) is self-pity. So it is best to stop allowing our feelings to dictate to us and start doing the dictating ourselves. This was brought home to me vividly when speaking to

one of my brothers who has suffered from multiple episodes of depression. I used to drive across Sydney late at night on a number of occasions just to be with him. I remember one occasion when he told me that his psychologist had said that his past habit of acquiescing to situations was hampering his recovery.

I have never forgotten this truth

Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book Spiritual Depression says the trick is to know how to handle yourself and wherever possible take charge. We have to preach to ourselves, question ourselves, and upbraid ourselves. We are not the helpless victims of our feelings. Instead we are to be firm with ourselves:

*"Soul, what are you doing feeling like this? Why are you downcast within me? Put your hope in God."*

Having poured out his feelings and made himself think about his pilgrimage with God, this psalmist speaks to himself realistically. And even if his circumstances don't change or change ever so slowly he is convinced God will hear him and he will *again praise him* as his personal Saviour and God.

## 5. Conclusion

Here is a scriptural model of praying when downcast. Be honest with yourself in the presence of God. Deliberately recall the past blessings of God. Conduct an inner war to confront the negative feelings and wait on the Lord for His salvation. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our help. If we trust him now, we shall soon have cause to praise him again. As one writer wisely sums it all up - *faith rebukes despondency and hope triumphs over despair.*

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