PSALM 42: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”

This question is asked twice in Psalm 42. Clearly the psalmist is depressed. Normally when I teach a lesson I like to spend a little time up front introducing the passage that we’re going to be in, maybe give you the setting or provide some context or other helpful information. I’m not going to do that with Psalm 42. I’m going to begin this morning by just reading it all the way through one time. Then as we examine it verse by verse we’ll make a few observations and find application. What I want you to notice as I read this are all the highs and lows that this unnamed psalmist is experiencing. Listen…

READ Psalm 42:1-11

I mean, this is a roller coaster ride, emotionally. Do you see that? On one hand he’s downcast, in despair. On the other hand he won’t let go of God. The psalmist is a believer and he (or she as some commentators suggest) is expressing what’s going on inside of them – an honest expression to God about his feelings – and they are all over the place! Spiritual highs and lows. How about you? Can you relate? Have you ever felt this way? Maybe you’re there right now, I don’t know. The fact is, life is hard – yes, even if you’re a born-again believer in Jesus Christ. Martin Lloyd Jones wrote a book based on Psalm 42 entitled “Spiritual Depression.” It’s something we all battle at one time or another. The hymn our class closed with last week included the words: “Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Savior, still our refuge—Take it to the Lord in prayer.” That’s what we need to do when we’re depressed, beat down by life and that is what the psalmist is doing here in Psalm 42.

Let’s begin. READ Title to Psalm 42. Again this is an instructive psalm and it is meant to be sung – the sons of Korah were the song leaders. Given that this is a song, a sad song, I see it as the Hebrew version of the Blues! Not all songs are happy songs. Sometimes we cry when we sing. Sometimes we sing the blues.

The psalmist starts out by expressing the way he feels, his spiritual condition. READ Psalm 42:1-2.

Do you recall the picture I had up on the screen of the deer drinking from the river? Well that’s where the psalmist WANTS to be. But he isn’t there. He’s longing, he’s thirsting for God. He pictures himself as a deer wandering around the dry, parched land desperately in search of water. He is in a dry place spiritually and he’s longing for God, the living God. His tongue is parched, spiritually. Isaiah 41:17 says, “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.” And that is precisely the psalmist’s condition here in Psalm 42. This picture of God being living water for our spiritual thirst is repeated by Jesus. To the woman at the well Jesus promised to give “living water” (Jn 4:10). He told her “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 6:14). Then in John 6:35 He said: “Whoever believes in Me shall never thirst.” So the psalmist realizes that God is his source of spiritual life, refreshment for his parched soul. In God’s presence is where he longs to be. But, for whatever reason, he feels distant from God. “When shall I come and appear before God?” he asks in v 2. It is the longing of his heart to be back in the presence of God, to be revived spiritually. So this is his condition. And he is being honest about it.

READ Psalm 42:3

“My tears,” he’s literally crying. He is deeply saddened. And it’s a sadness that won’t go away. The godless people in his life (maybe even some of them who call themselves his friends) question him. Basically they’re taunting him: “Where is your God?” Obviously whatever situation he finds himself in doesn’t look good to the people around him. They know this man is a believer and yet he’s experiencing all of this turmoil in his life. So they’re saying, “Yeah, old boy, where is your God now? I thought He was a good and loving God!” We still get those voices today, don’t we? Every time there’s a disaster, like 9-11 or Sandy Hook, people begin questioning the very existence and the goodness of God. “Why would a loving God allow this to happen?” And if we listen to those kind of voices long enough we could begin to be discouraged, have doubts of our own, a crisis of faith.

So this man is deeply depressed. By the way, lest we think that being depressed is unspiritual and sinful, I want to remind you that even Jesus was depressed at times. At Lazarus tomb Jesus wept. He was heartbroken over Jerusalem. In the Garden the night He was betrayed He told His disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” But that said, there is a right way to handle depression and that’s what this psalm shows us.

READ Psalm 42:4

As the psalmist is pouring out his heart to God, his soul, the Lord brings into his mind memories of better times when he was with other believers on the way up to Jerusalem, to the house of God for one of the Jewish festivals. This was a highlight of his life. Those were such happy times! You know, when we become depressed, get discouraged, it’s good to remember, to recall those times of spiritual blessing, spiritual high points in our lives. *[recall memories from CHFBC and HTBC]*

READ Psalm 42:5 and first line of 6

Whatever it is that is causing this man’s depression has not gone away. It is still there. He’s still dealing with it. And by the way, when he finishes this psalm, this prayer, the issue is still unresolved. So it may well be that the situation itself, the circumstance, remains even after we’ve prayed about it and given it to God. That is reality. Notice in this psalm he never pleads for relief from his problem. He only longs for the grace of God’s presence while going through it.

Notice that in this verse he begins to talk to himself. One commentary I read said that he is giving himself a good talking to: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” His response to himself isn’t “Get over it!” “Move on!” No, what IS his response? And it’s a good one, the right one – “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” He is reminding himself of his one and only hope. “Self, you are not going to be able to solve this issue yourself. It is out of your control. Only God can resolve it, if He chooses to do so. Place your hope in Him!” That is what he tells himself. Good words.

Now in verse 6 he is still downcast, but again he remembers something from his past, which encourages him to some degree…

READ Psalm 42:6-8

He remembers God in three very real specific places in his life. The “land of Jordan” is a reference to the Jordan River Valley that runs N-S thru Israel from the mountains in the north down to the Dead Sea. “Hermon” refers to Mount Hermon the highest peak in Israel, a prominent landmark visible for many miles. “Mount Mizar” or Hill Mizar, we’re not sure where that is. But to the psalmist these three locations had a special place in his heart. At one time in his life God had been very real to Him in these places and he’s recalling that. We have these same sorts of spiritual markers in our lives don’t we? Places where we fondly recall experiencing God in perhaps amazing ways *[examples].* The psalmist even recalls how he could see God in the roar of the waterfalls – there are several of these in Israel. But then – and here we see his despair taking over him again – he feels overwhelmed, beat down: “All your breakers and your waves have gone over me.” Again, this back and forth between his feelings, on one hand overwhelmed by his circumstances, on the other hand affirming God’s sovereign love for him, “his steadfast love,” v 8. He even sings a song to God at night, it is no doubt a sad song, he’s singing the blues. Perhaps he even cries himself to sleep. As you read thru Psalm 42 you can’t help but sense this man’s spiritual struggle, highs and his lows at the same time.

READ Psalm 42:9-11

“Why have you forgotten me?” Has God really forgotten him? No, but he feels that way. From the previous verse he knows with his head that God has not forgotten him. He just feels overwhelmed. This reminds me of Job as he was responding to the chiding of his companions (they weren’t really his friends as it turned out). They had criticized Job for the things he had been saying about God. Job responds to them in Job 6:26: “Do you think that you can reprove words, when the speech of a despairing man is wind?” What was Job saying? “Don’t judge me by what I say when I am in pain. It’s just wind. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Look, the psalmist is in obvious pain, maybe physically, certainly emotionally, and probably spiritually. He’s hurting. Life is beating him up. He is not happy. He’s drowning in sorrow. He isn’t exactly surrounded by the most encouraging people either! He closes in verse 11 repeating what he said earlier – the cry of his heart: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” That’s his present reality. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” That is his hope.

*[If there is time, read quote by Spurgeon]*

Last week we sang my wife’s favorite hymn and this week we’ll close by singing my favorite hymn, appropriate for this lesson as believers, many of us experiencing some degree of depression. The hymn “It is Well with My Soul” was written in 1873 by Horatio Spafford. He wrote the words to this hymn after the tragic death of his four daughters (the ship they were on sank after it struck another vessel). Miraculously his wife Anna survived. He wrote this hymn on the ocean on his way to meet her while sailing near the very spot where his daughters had died. Sometimes I think when we know the stories behind the hymns they take on even greater meaning.