

# Why are you downcast, O my soul?

Psalm 42:1-11

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## Introduction

Last Sunday we encouraged you not to neglect your devotional life this summer (assuming you have one! That's Basic Christianity 101!). A healthy time alone with God is something we have to learn, and it takes practice! This Sunday I want to encourage you also to go to the gym! Fourth-century church father Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, a strong defender of orthodox Christianity against Arianism and paganism, once said that **the Psalms** are the **gymnasium of the soul** (your body isn't the only part of you that needs exercise, but your soul!). So go to this new gym this summer! I call the Psalms the Lord's "**therapy sessions**" for our souls (Greek *therapéuo* = heal): He counsels His saints through the rocky places, desert wilderness, valley of the shadow, and all the other rough terrain; He lets us lay our burdens and sorrows on Him, as well as vent our frustrations and pour out our hearts. In our psalm for today, we'll hear from a discouraged saint who's far from home, Jerusalem, and his people; he's downhearted and pouring out his soul before the Lord – healthy!

This is the psalm easily remembered for its association with the deer panting for streams of water, so the psalmist must have observed them on a hot day in the forest or meadow, maybe even hearing them bleat and bellow from thirst. This is the first psalm of the second book of the Psalms (42-72). As far back as our earliest manuscripts of the OT (1<sup>st</sup> century Dead Sea Scrolls), the Psalms have been divided into five books, probably in imitation of the five books of the Law (Torah). This was likely a literary arrangement that Ezra and other Jewish scribes decided on as they compiled the psalms into their existing order (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). The divisions aren't based on authorship or chronology, as a number of authors composed psalms, and their individual songs are mixed throughout the various collections. But this particular psalm is attributed to the sons of Korah, Levites from the family of Kohath. Remember Korah from the time of Moses? He was Moses' first cousin, so maybe there was a slight case of jealousy. Korah spearheaded a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses, putting the whole community at risk out there in the wilderness. The result was that he was swallowed up by the earth (Num. 16), because God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died – removed like a deadly cancer. But interestingly, Korah's sons were NOT part of that uprising and Scripture takes note that they did not die (Num. 26:11). And it seems by David's time they were serving in the music ministry of the temple worship (2 Chr. 20:19); perhaps due to their gratitude for this mercy to their forefather they became so notable in Israel for praising God.

## Part I: vv. 1-5:

So we begin with the panting deer, which expresses the idea of longing for God – a soul thirsty for God and aching over His seeming absence or remoteness. To make things worse, the psalmist has

no idea when this situation may be remedied (v. 2). It causes him untold grief (v. 3), with tears day and night, and he's also having to hear discouraging words from others, like **"Where is your God?"** They're badgering him all day long: "Where's the evidence for this God you brag about? Why are you suffering like this if your invisible God is so powerful?" Can't you just hear the taunts? Maybe you can even identify. The famous British preacher Charles Spurgeon said it like this: **"God hidden and foes raging: a pair of evils enough to bring down the stoutest heart."** He had lost his sense of God's presence – ever happen to you? Lost his joy and gratitude – ever happen to you? So in v. 4, his mind wanders nostalgically to those times when he was in Jerusalem, even leading the festal throng in their celebration, but it's a bittersweet memory: joyful in that moment, but painful now that he's far from it. But as he says here, he's in the process of pouring out his soul, emptying its contents, getting them out so he can see them, analyze them more objectively! If it's just private reflection, turning in on yourself, it will only lead to self-pity and more sorrow; with no objective truth, there's no lasting value. But if God is brought into the dialogue, what a difference He can make! When we realize we can't fix ourselves, we should instinctively reach out to God (at least if we've been taught Scriptural truth: that He really cares! So don't leave God out of your painful inner dialogue!). This is why crises always have very beneficial potential for our spiritual life! They drive us toward the Lord!

In v. 5 we get a partial resolution: **"Why are you downcast, O my soul? And why so disturbed within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."** This is pure Spirit-led inner dialogue. Spurgeon declares that the psalmist's **"faith reasons with his fears, his hope argues with his sorrows."** The "Prince of preachers," as he was known, pastored the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for 38 years, and had a long history of poor health: diagnosed with gout at 33, probably the cause of his lifelong bouts with depression; he died at 57 from gout and kidney complications. So Spurgeon identified deeply with this psalm. The psalmist was cross-examining his soul here, first of all, recognizing his own state of mind: **"downcast,"** from the Hebrew *shajaj*, literally, bowed down, humiliated, prostrate (the Septuagint translates *perilupos* = exceedingly sorrowful, deeply grieved, same word Jesus used in Gethsemane, Mt. 26:38). Can believers in Jesus get discouraged to the point of depression? Emotions are complicated and complex. Even the experts aren't sure what causes us to experience emotions (has something to do with neurons and brain chemistry), but neither social sciences nor neurobiology has been able to explain their origin and functioning. For Christians, sometimes emotions can be troubling and untrustworthy because some seem downright sinful, though others seem very spiritual. God is the One who gave us the gift of emotions; He created us to experience them, but there are godly and ungodly ways to manage them; they were never intended to take the steering wheel of life! (especially in a family or /marriage! Don't let your family be torn apart by uncontrolled emotions! Let faith reason with your fears, and hope argue with your sorrows – that's the way of Emotional Intelligence!). Biblical truth was intended to rule over all – calling on Jesus as Lord over every situation is a life habit you desperately need to develop (= letting God influence your self-talk!). God is always good, no matter what's happening in our lives and world, no matter the ups and downs of our emotions: strong emotions don't make you automatically right. So God's goodness needs to be the reference point for our emotions at all times. That's why learning to let Him into our inner dialogue is so important: it gives us a stable hope, even in the midst of discouragement (like the song we learned as kids, ***Jesus loves me, this I know: you nail that down!***).

## Part II: vv. 6-11

Halfway through the Psalm, v. 6 begins the response where the psalmist brings God fully to mind in his anguish: **"My soul is downcast within me..."** So what does he do? **"Therefore I remember you!"** Because God brings order out of chaos – we're always trying to make sense out of life's chaos! How I wish it could become second nature for us to bring God into our chaos and anguish! The psalmist even turns on his location device (GPS) at this point, as if letting God know where he is: he's at the source of the Jordan River, at the base of Mt. Hermon, a cluster of mountains near Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made his famous confession of faith, where Jesus took him and two others up

the mountain to witness the transfiguration; and Mt. Mizar is simply a small mountain nearby. In other words, he's a long way north! So this is part of the psalmist's meditating on the place where he finds himself – beautiful as it is, it doesn't compare with the presence of God! Do we get that message? Earthly joys cannot match the depth of God! And v. 7 reminds us of this as the psalmist apparently hears the sound of a waterfall roaring down the mountainside (likely the Banyas Waterfall, at the foot of Mt. Hermon, the largest in Israel), and he meditates on that sound by saying **“deep calls to deep”** – literally, “abyss to abyss.” The waterfall resonates with something deep in his soul, and it's as if he feels those sheets of water washing over him. It's truly a momentary oasis as he feels a moment of respite from the depression and anxiety: truth bursts out of his heart (v. 8): **“By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.”** This is Yahweh whom he's addressing, and what Yahweh commands is His steadfast love (Heb. *hesed* = lovingkindness, basic term in God's self-revelation to Moses: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in mercy/lovingkindness and truth/faithfulness (Ex. 34:6). The psalmist associates the covenant name with that powerful revelation, and just as the Israelites in the wilderness had the cloud by day and the fire by night, the psalmist knows he has God's steadfast love by day, and His song in his heart by night (this is worship!), a prayer to the God of his life from the depths of his discouragement.

But just as things were looking up, v. 9 tells us that he had a bit more pain to unload, and it's a “biggie”: **“I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’”** Calling Him your Rock and then accusing Him of forgetting you? Sounds a bit double-minded! But it's actually a very common poetic device called the rhetorical question (a question asked more for dramatic effect or to make a point than as an affirmation). The psalms are full of them. Has God actually forgotten him? Doesn't the psalmist actually know? Had God forsaken Jesus on the cross when He quoted Ps. 22? By David's own confession later in the psalm, we know He had not (v. 24): **“For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; nor has he hidden his face from him, but when he cried to him for help, he listened.”** So the question has everything to do with the psalmist's grief and the oppression he's under. This is confirmed by v. 10: **“As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’”** How deeply He would like to show them the truth of His God, or just show them up and be avenged of these enemies! It's not yet the attitude of Jesus toward enemies ... for whom He would lay down His life.

In v. 11 he comes to comfort his soul once more with some wise self-talk: **“Why are you downcast, O my soul? And why so disturbed within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”** The same as he said in v. 5, but one clarification: **“my salvation”** here in the Hebrew is יְשׁוּעָתִי ... *Yeshua/ot panay* = to save /rescue my countenance; He saves our face ... from shame and humiliation! He went through total humiliation and shame on our account, at our hands, for our sakes, to save our face! That's our Rock!

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When Hanna Wilt was 22, she was diagnosed with abdominal mesothelioma, a rare cancer usually linked to asbestos exposure. Doctors gave her 6 months to live. Her young life became consumed with horrific symptoms and brutal cancer treatments. This cancer fills the abdomen, starving the patient. But she lived several years beyond her prognosis. She wrote pages and pages of poetry recently published as a book; that was her self-talk, in which she invited God to play a vital role. At the university where she was studying, she was invited to address the student body (2019): **“You read through Scripture, and all of a sudden you're confronted with all this pain and suffering and questioning. The answer we're met with is a God that saves us by dying for us.... I don't think we can begin to comprehend God's love and grace until we allow ourselves to confront the difficult questions like pain and suffering.”** With the extra time, she also filed a lawsuit against a big corporation – one of thousands claiming that a talc-based baby powder, which scientists discovered was sometimes laced

with asbestos, caused aggressive cancer. Asbestos is often found in the same mining locations as talc. Wilt as an athlete had used the baby powder daily for much of her young life, not just when she was a baby. She rode horses, ran track, did not smoke. But she contracted a disease that typically affects older men with a lifetime of asbestos exposure through construction jobs. Her lawsuit alleged that the company knew of the risks of asbestos in its product but hid it from consumers, but she wasn't in it for the benefits but only to hold the big companies accountable for their actions. Her sister Kiesel assessed her dilemma by saying that there aren't many resources to help you deal with "Your suffering is not going away, but God is still good, and He is with you." No one really wants to hear that, most especially as a believer because you count on being healed. Kiesel witnessed much of her sister's illness and concluded that Christians often just think **of eternal life as "what you can fall back on" rather than something that informs how you live every day.** Hannah learned to make it her daily hope leaving a tremendous testimony for all of us who follow in her wake – God held her countenance in His nail-scarred hands all through that journey; He saved her face!