

A Psalm for the Season

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Date: 24 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you do have Bibles with you, do turn to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament and to Psalm 42 and 43. This is the last of our standalone sermons that we planned for January, next Sunday, God willing. We hope to start a new series in the morning, which will be the story of the Old Testament, and we'll look forward to that. Please pray about that as we follow the theme of God through the Old Testament up to the coming of Jesus, but today I am looking in many ways at the theme of hope. A Psalm for the season is the title of the sermon. A subtitle might be hope when it's hopeless. And part of the inspiration for doing this was some of the students' Facebook status from since this week had the word hope included in them because they were publicising the Edinburgh Christian Union's mission week, this coming week, which is on the theme of hope. And I found that inspiring. That was great.

And then this morning, which, albeit my sermon was done and prepared by then, but this morning, the Walk With Me Daily devotionals that our dear friend Billy does and has sent out to us an email, the theme was hope. And I found that encouraging and helpful as well. But in order to maybe look at that whole theme, we're going to take a walk through the hopelessness that the psalmist was expressing here and that may be something that you can associate with in your life. You know, what do we do when things are absolutely rubbish for us as Christians?

And there doesn't seem to be any light and any guidance or any help spiritually when our Christian lives seem to have been rubbish for ages and ages and we're struggling and we are being dealt what we feel is blow after blow. And we wonder, well, what's the point of believing? What's the point of being a Christian? What is, what can we do when things are like that for us? Because we can be tempted to have different responses. We can be tempted to maybe just go through the motions as a Christian, but not really find any peace or meaning or hope through these events. We can hear people speaking verses from the Bible to us and they feel very hollow. It can feel trite and unrealistic for us. We can maybe get used to the emptiness and we can sometimes just walk away.

We can do what I was telling the kids earlier about and we can just turn our back. Well, what does God say? We remember God is a living God and we remember His Word as a living word for us. And we're going to look at that in Psalm 42 and 43 because most people who study the Old Testament and commentators on the Psalms will agree that Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 are very probably just one Psalm. If you'll notice in your Bibles that Psalm 42 and the one before it and several ones before it and the ones after it, apart from 43, they all have a title, but actually Psalm 43 doesn't have a title. And of course, there's a chorus that we read at the very beginning of the service, verse 5, why are you cast down on my soul and so on. And that's repeated in verse 11, why are you cast down on my soul. And then it's repeated at the end of Psalm 43, why are you cast down on my soul. So these and the themes that come together would suggest that they were originally just one Psalm and we're taking it as one Psalm. Probably written by David, although it doesn't say that's the case, but the music for it was certainly done by the sons of Korah and given to the choir master to be sung by God's people. Now, we don't, again, we don't even know the circumstances of the Psalm. It may have been, if David did write it, that when he was dethroned, as it were, when Absalom, his son, his beloved son, took over the throne and rebelled against him, and he had to run away for his life and was hiding in the hills away from Jerusalem.

That may have been the context, but this is God's living word also for us. And the context isn't clear, which is helpful to remind us that it is a context for all times. Things are not as they should be. Life, in the first place then, can we look at life being catastrophic for the believer.

[5 : 08] Life can be catastrophic for you and for me as Christians. Take David, if it's David who's the writer here of the Psalm. It's a litany of suffering and misery. It's overwhelming. It's not good, really, and it makes depressing reading, in many ways. There is a spiritual longing for him in the early verses, one and two, you know, as the deer pants for flowing streams. So my soul longs for you, oh God, my soul thirsts for God. There is spiritual longing. There's painful memories as he thinks about the throne in verse 4 that used to go with leading the procession to the house of God, the celebrations, the joy, the festival, the company, the fellowship, both with God and with people. And he's longing for that, longing for the palace, for the temple, for the prophets, for the festivals, for the presence of God, and it's not there. He's someone whose tears have never been far from him. In verse 3, we have, my tears being food day and night. He experiences the ridicule from others while all day long they say, where is your God? You know, this is David who's the man after God's own heart, who represented God and spoke in many ways on God's behalf and defended

God's honor, and here people are saying, well, where is your God now? What kind of God do you have? There's despair and there's anxiety in his life in the refrain and the chorus, you know.

You're cast down, there's turmoil, there's despair in his life. It's repeated three times between the two Psalms as we have them. Pit of his stomach emptiness and dis-peace and anxiety, so much so that he feels, in verse 7, for example, that he is drowning.

And Jews had great fear, as we've seen before, of the sea and of water in many ways. And he felt that danger, the chaos of being out of control, of drowning darkness. Terrible for him, the king of Israel, to feel these ways. Isolated and abandoned by God, as he speaks of in the next Psalm 43, vindicate me. Why, you I take refuge, why have you rejected me? Why am I oppressed?

He's surrounded by enemies, he feels rejected by God, tremendous, tremendous depression and discontent in his own life.

[8 : 05] And maybe for the first time in a long while, as you've listened to sermons or I've joined us today, you can say for the first time, amen, amen. I know exactly what that is like.

And maybe, maybe particularly in these days when we can't join together and we miss church and fellowship and everything, you're longing for that again. You're longing for the fellowship, you're longing for what you once experienced of God's presence in your life. Maybe you feel your life just simply isn't going down the road that you hoped it to go down. Broken dreams, tears are never far from you. Maybe, can I just speak for a moment to the men, maybe as a man, you're struggling with anxiety and tears, and you feel, well, that's not a manly thing to be doing, to be feeling this despair, this overwhelmed sense of being out of control, and you're struggling with these emotions, maybe particularly at this time. You have no answers. Maybe it's trouble and difficulties and struggles at work or at home at this time, or it might be financial or relational. You feel isolated and abandoned by God. Where's the blessings? What's the point of believing? Where are the benefits? Battling. What do we do in these times? And we all face these times as believers in greater or lesser degree. We all ask the question, where is God in these things and during these times? Now, I know there'll be other factors that we ask about when we are struggling and we're discouraged and depressed and downcast. It might not all be questions about faith and God that we're asking, but if we are Christians, we will ask that. And if you're not a Christian this morning, maybe you'll be looking at Christians and saying, well, where is your God? And what is the point of your belief? What's all about? So the question, the second thing that I want to say is really related, if the first thing was life can be catastrophic.

The second is, where do we go with our despair? Where do we go with our discouragement and our depression and our feeling of being overwhelmed and drowning? Because, you know, as Christians or anybody, in fact, we go somewhere with them, don't we? We journey somewhere with our despair.

What do we do with that? With our suffering and our struggles. Where do we go? Where do we turn? To put it just in maybe everyday parlance, what do you do when your life as a Christian just sucks and is miserable? When you think all the talk of his love and his care and his concern is vacuous and empty platitudes. Well, can I ask you briefly to consider four things from this Psalm? And they're brilliant. I hope you'll find them helpful. And the first, obviously, that I would say is name it. Name your despair before the living God. You know, verses 8 and 9 are great verses there in Psalm 42. By the day the Lord commands his steadfast love 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?

And that kind of, in a sense, is the hub of the whole Psalm. See, God knows. This is his living word. He's legitimized these complaints and these despairing cries, and he wants them.

[12:13] He wants us to bring them to him. It's that whole thing about turning to God again, isn't it? He recognizes and he wants us to know that he knows it's a battle. We have, as Christians, the greatest relationship known to humanity, and he wants us to plug into that at a time like this, the source of life and the hope for life. And he said, don't hold anything back.

But make these requests and cry out to the living God. Now, just can I ask you just for a moment, if you scan back in your life, as I must do, or scan back in the last, say, month of your life, what have our prayers been like? What have your prayers been like?

Have they been nice, well-molded and structured sentences, nice phrases, snatched requests during the day? Well, at all the time we're avoiding the elephant in the room.

We're avoiding the deep-seated spiritual battle that we're facing, the complaints and the struggles against God, the lack of understanding. But we don't talk to Him about that. We don't mention it.

We just say nice things and we make nice requests to Him. But He says, Luke, tell me, tell me everything that's in your heart and soul. Because I'm asking, I'm asking, I'm a derrick, I'm asking you today as I ask myself, who is your counselor? Who is it that you speak to about these things? Who is your spiritual ombudsman? To whom do you go with your spiritual complaints procedure? Do you go to everyone but the boss? Do you think God can't hear it or won't be able to take it? Do you think He'll turn away and say, oh, I failed that and I don't know what to do? That's where He wants us. He wants He wants us to take it all to Him. And I, oh, if you're not a believer this morning, it's brilliant that you're listening and it's brilliant that you're here and that you're taking the time to tune in.

[14 : 20] And I would love just to ask you, where is it that you take your despair? Where is it you can go with to your despair? And to these metaphysical and philosophical and spiritual and emotional questions, where do you go with them? I love the cartoons. I've used this illustration before, but it's a long time, so I can use it again. You had Tom and Jerry or something like that.

Just, I love them. And sometimes, you know, maybe Tom would see a stick of dynamite and it would be lit and he would just look at that and he would swallow it and the stomach would just explode internally as he swallowed the dynamite for whatever reason. And then he would carry on running about.

Now, that's a cartoon, but that's not like real life. If we internalize everything and if we swallow all our despairing thoughts and just compress them or suppress them or try and deal with them internally ourselves, then our insides, our very thought process, our life just gets messed up and broken. But we're asked to take them in relationship outside of ourselves to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Name it before God. It's the first thing. The second thing is remember as a believer, remember past joys. Verse 4, then these things I remember as I poured out my soul, how I would go out with a throng and lead them in procession to the house of God. Remember these Christian experiences. We often forget them. It's the curse of forgetfulness in our lives.

Remember again in verse 6 that refrain, he talks about praising God, my salvation and my God. Remember that it's in relationship we are. Remember these days. Remember good times spiritually and strong times. And again, I asked the question, have you got that reality to fall back on? To remember, which is such an important part of our Christian lives to be those who remember.

So name it before God. Remember past joy. And for me, this is the most important thing because it's the thing that we deal least with in our understanding of God and of Scripture. Recognize paradox in our lives. Recognize the reality of paradox in our lives.

[16 : 58] Can I just explain what I mean in this Psalm? And it's very important. Look at the paradox of verse 9, for example, I say to God, my rock, good strong words of faith, why have you forgotten me? Because his knowledge and his experience seem so different. Or verse 2 of Psalm 43, for you are the God in whom I take refuge. Why have you rejected me? Do you see the paradox? Do you see the tension in these verses where there's faith known and understood but the experience, the emotion, the feeling of that isn't there. There's great paradox.

Then you've got verse 3 where he says, my tears have been my food day and night. And then we also have this recognition of God that day and night he is with him, and we recognize the difference between the two. Sorry, it's verse 3 where he feels tears has been his meat. And then verse 8 where he says, the Lord commands his steadfast love by day, and then at night his song is with me. So there's this tears day and night, but there's also this recognition that the Lord commands his love and his song is with him day and night. It's paradoxical truth, the reality of what we know and what we believe and what we trust. And sometimes what we feel is very, very different. We can't be putting God in a box. It is not all meat and tidy. This is a battle. And so we have also this amazing contradiction, as it were, between God being the living waters. In verse 1, my, as the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, oh God, my soul thirsts for God, the living God. And many people would link that with the idea of living water, the Old Testament picture of God being living water and the Sammest longing for these flowing streams. And at the same time in verse 7, he feels he's drowning, deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls, as if God is the living water, is drowning him with the experiences he's having. And so there's paradox. There's confusing, confusing and conflicting experiences. And as believers, we need to come in terms with that, that our felt experience, our emotions, what we sense is often different from what we also believe and what, where our hope lies and where our foundation is and where our relationship with God is genuine. That's the paradox of battle and of living in the already of truth and the yet and not yet of perfection in the future. And so I ask each of us to consider that paradox and also again, if you're not a

Christian, do you see that paradox and then just dismiss faith as being paradoxical and a waste of time without considering the alternative you've chosen? That's the third thing, recognize the paradox. The last thing that I want to mention is if we've, if we're naming it before God in prayer, if we're remembering past joy, not just in our own experience, but I think through his word as well, I didn't really mention that. And as we recognize the paradox, then it's also important. And I've said this before as well, speak to yourself. I don't believe that's the first sign of madness, speaking to yourself, because the psalmist here, particularly in the refrain and the chorus, he's speaking to himself. Why, speaking to his soul is inner being, his very core. Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me, hoping God for I shall praise him, my salvation and my God? So there's this intentional and deliberate and conscious speaking to himself.

It's as if I was saying, if I would hold on a minute, Derek, listen to yourself. Here, it's kind of shaking yourself in a very conscious and very intentional, deliberate way.

And he's asking, God encourages us to ask ourselves to question the certainty of your despair. Isn't that good? To question how certain is your despair and what is it based?

[22 : 30] And compare it with what is absolute and what is unchanging in your life and your future and the person of God. Are circumstances and experiences, are they going to pass? Yes, they are. Is this pandemic going to pass? Yes, it is. Is this isolation going to end? Of course it will, because life is short and it is full of change and variety. But question if that is why you're despairing, and if it is, then rekindle your relationship with the eternal living God and question the certainty of your despair. And maybe if you're not a Christian this morning, maybe question the certainty of your unbelief. Question yourself, is my unbelief rational?

Is it wise? Does it give me the answers to life and meaning that the gospel and Jesus Christ do? To question the certainty of your despair and also rekindle the reality of your hope.

And particularly, not just in the refrain, but maybe in the very well-known word that lasts towards the end of Psalm 43, send out your light and your truth. Let them guide me, let me, let them bring me to your holy hill to the dwelling. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with a liar. Oh God, my God. Speak to yourself, question the certainty of your despair, and rekindle the reality of hope, particularly for us as we have the benefit of the completed Bible and the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Rekindle a sense of expectation based on the truth. My Savior, my salvation, my God, take a journey back to the future and cry out for God's light and truth in your heart and in your soul. You see, send out your light, He prays, and your truth. You see, the focus changes, doesn't it?

So often, we look at life with our light, with the limited light we have, and the limited knowledge of truth that we have, and it just seems pear-shaped and catastrophic. And He says, Lord, please show me your light and your truth. See, the difference between a struck match in the darkness, which is our light, can only light for a very short time before it's extinguished, and it doesn't light very much. And the light of the sun, which is lighting up our whole world, and that's the light of God that we look for in our lives, in our life, and in our experience, and we pray for that.

[25 : 36] And we take a walk at the same time. We take a walk to His holy hill, to the altar of God, to His dwelling, which we find His hill is Calvary, ultimately, His place of presence, and the altar that's on that hill is the cross. That's where we find unbridled joy and delight, because it's there we see the meaning and the center of our lives, and the hope, the hope, that He brings us, the hope that He has dealt with our sin, with our death, that He will take our suffering, and as we cry out to Him, He will give us shalom and peace, and give us direction through it, and He will guide us. He will hold our hands. He will not abandon us, even when our experiences feel that that's not the case. And we sense a paradox. He wants us to remind ourselves that His light and His truth is with us, and that we will experience joy and pleasure in His closer presence in this life, but also in the life to come. We simply can't move far from here.

We can't move far from the cross. It's the one place where the dark night of our soul can begin to be dispelled. We're loved and healed beyond comprehension, even when it doesn't feel like that. That's why the Lord's Supper is so important to us as Christians, the sacrament that God has given us, because it reminds us of His love revealed as we saw a few weeks ago in a way that nothing else can, and nothing else ever would. Where is your hope? Again, if you've managed to hang in there as an unbeliever through this sermon, where does your hope lie? Is it in yourself? Is it in your just living the best kind of life you can, which is noble, but despairing in many ways, because we all die? Is it in politics or in justice of some, where does that come from? Where is that justice in? Where is that morality? Please consider where your hope lies. So these four things,

I think enable us and help us to deal, begin spiritually to deal with despair. We sometimes may need medical intervention, and in many ways we will need God to work in multifaceted ways, but from a relational point of view with Him, name it before God, remember past joys, recognize the paradox and speak to yourself. And in conclusion, this is a song, and there is expectation of singing this song by David together, and the Psalms are God's songs for God's people, and the sons of Korah set them to music. They were there to be sung. They were there to be sung together, and I think there's great healing in singing praise to God together. It's one of the things I greatly miss is coming together and singing praises. There's lots I miss just now. I'm missing all of you just now, and I do just encourage you, because I miss you so much. You know, get in touch. If you want to go for a walk, let's get in touch and go for a walk and have some chat together in Christ, and encourage and build one another up by longing for these things. But I do think we value singing and praise too little together. Maybe we value it more now since it's been taken from us, but it's soul music. It's full of medicine, and it's to be sung together. And we learn these deep truths together as we sing. Just the Psalms, but the truth of Scripture. Let's not relegate or trivialize or devalue song. It's an incredible ability to give us expectant hope and truth as we sing it together. A future of joined alike, we will praise Him in the new creation. And I just want to finish with the words of a song. I hope we'll do this song sometime soon. It's one of City of Lights song called What Love My God. What love my God so gracious and extreme was strong enough to come and fight for me, to go through hell and down into the grave and raise me up to see you face to face.

Oh, Your love my God like a flood as heaven opened up pouring out on us. Oh, praise the King who came to the world in His love like a mighty flood. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray for Your help. We thank You that You understand that we are frail and often weak and compromised and battling with paradox. The joyful times don't seem to last often and yet often because we turn our backs to You. Help us through dark times and to see Your light and Your truth. And made this message, this Psalm, be powerfully used in the lives of many today who listen. And may You speak powerfully through that living word to them. We pray for hope in our lives in this despairing and rather hopeless time. And we pray that You would bless the young people, especially the students who are seeking to online do various events this next week to bring hope and expectation into their own lives as believers and also to those who are not Christians. We pray for many people to come to

Jesus Christ in hope, in rescue, in salvation, that they can say, God, my salvation and my God. Amen.