CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Spiritual Depression

MAY 3, 2012

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Psalm 42, 43. The greatest leaders in history had their fair share of weaknesses and defeats. The psalmist was a leader in Israel who pours out his heart. We learn about the darkness of his depression and how he came through it.

Depression is commonplace. Many leaders have struggled with it, and the Bible is replete with examples. Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 19:4), David (cf. Psalm 32:3), Jeremiah (cf. Jer 15:10), and Jonah (cf. Jonah 4:8) are a few of them. George Whitefield, who was instrumental in the Great Awakening, knew depression, as did Charles Spurgeon, a man who preached to tens-of-thousands each week in London. Spurgeon went through a time where he "spent hours in tears by day, and dreams of terror by night."[1] Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt could relate.

Psalms 42 and 43 introduce us to someone like these men. He was one of the sons of Korah (cf. Psa 42:1), a Levite who had led the people of Israel in music at the temple. All he once lived for was taken. He shares the factors that led to his depression and the realization that helped him overcome it.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

FORCED ABSENCE

Psalm 42:1-2—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?

It has been said that, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Distance from family and friends can be a difficult struggle that produces a longing to be reunited. This is the yearning the psalmist experienced though his was for serving God. He had been taken into exile, could no longer lead worship an so desperately wanted to go back.

The temple was located in Jerusalem, and the psalmist was in the vicinity of Mount Hermon (cf. Psa 42:6). The distance was no more than Bloomington to downtown Chicago (120 miles), but atop the peaks of this range he had his last glimpse of home. He "panted" to worship God, to "appear" before Him at the temple and worship—things he would never do again.

Sure, he knew that God is everywhere and can be worshipped from any place. The point is this leader had devoted his life to leading others at the temple. He could still worship without being there, but life would never be the same, and the thought of no return plunged his soul into depression.

BITTER WORDS

Psalm 42:3—My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Psalm 42:10—As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

The psalmist didn't choose these companions for his journey. He also didn't choose to leave Jerusalem, but was forced. He was a refugee, and it is likely he was being exiled along with his people to Assyria or Babylon. He was being taunted and mocked for believing in a God who had so little power to save His people. *Where is your God?* The words cut like a blade. Where's God? The psalmist's enemies thought him to be a fool for still believing.

The weight of their insults crushed his soul such that, "tears have been my food day and night." He would never see his home again, never lead in worship again, and would be insulted for the rest of his life.

Psalm 43:1-2 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me! For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

The psalmist cries out to God: *Vindicate me! Defend my cause!* It's a plea for God silence the mockers. They didn't want to hear the psalmist talk or defend his faith—they just loved jeering him. His only hope in life was that God would somehow make Himself known and vindicate His Name.

However, nothing happened God heard the pleas of his servant, but didn't seem to answer. The journey only continues, the stinging insults never stop, and this leader felt rejected from the God he loved.

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PAST EVENTS

Psalm 42:4—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.

Memories do not always soothe the soul. For those whose past was better than their present, reminiscing hurts. In fact, the ability to remember is one of the torments that makes Hell all the worse (cf. Luke 16:25).

The psalmist recalled the years prior to his captivity. Life was so good. He remembered the temple pilgrimages and the festival celebrations. The times he led the people in these were some of the greatest joys to him.

Now, as he passed over the mountains in exile, he knew while writing this psalm that these joys would never be again. Hope had been snuffed out. He would become a slave until death. The impossibility of ever reliving the good times ushered him into unending chasms of darkness.

PAINFUL CIRCUMSTANCES

Psalm 42:7—Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

The waterfalls with their rocks, waves, and awesome roar portray the state of this man's soul. Violent and rushing waters. Churning and chaotic. Instead of enjoying his walk with the Lord, he feels crushed by despair. Like a man who's gone over Niagara Falls, the force of the water keeps him from ever surfacing.

The psalmist's plight is overwhelming, and there's nothing he can do to change it. He's helpless in the chains of an enemy. There's no hope of life changing. It's over. Anyone in his shoes can understand why he's depressed. Yet, he doesn't resign himself to a life of depression.

A REALIZATION THAT CAN HELP

Psalm 42:11, 43:5—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.

The psalmist didn't believe he was a victim of his environment. He easily could have pitied himself and given in to emotion, but he doesn't. In the midst of his depression, he makes a choice to look upward. He refuses to let his emotions direct his life, but goes back to the things he knows about God.

First, the psalmist questions himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" Instead of giving himself over to a sad state, he looks within and questions what factors have led him downward. He stops and tries to piece together why he feels this way.

Second, he challenges himself to "hope in God." It's easy to spiral further into depression by allowing oneself to believe what is false. For the psalmist, he could have let himself believe that God had abandoned him or that he's better off dead. Yet, he rejected what was false and hoped in God.

The psalmist could have fixed his hope on the possibility of release or of going home. Maybe these would happen. Likely not. The point is that both are wishy-washy hopes. The only solid hope this man had was the truth that God never changed. Life had changed quite drastically; God had not. His power, love, grace, mercy, etc. All the attributes of the Almighty never flinched. To think on the character and nature of God brought the psalmist tremendous comfort.

Third, this leader of Israel speaks truth to himself. On the basis of God's unchanging character, he's convinced that he will again praise the Lord. His circumstances were awful. He had no reason to rejoice. However, he knew not everything had been destroyed—God hadn't. As he meditated deeply on the thought that God was still there and trustworthy, he knew he would one day rejoice again. Whether in this life or the next, as a believer, his situation would absolutely improve.

The psalmist's circumstances didn't change. His thinking changed. The point is that as this dear saint battled his emotions and determined to think rightly, his depression subsided (cf. Psa 42:8; 43:3-4). He experienced joy when he anchored his hope in the God who's more than enough (cf. Phil 4:11-13).

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[1]Elizabeth Skoglund, *More than Coping* (Minneapolis, Minn.: World Wide, 1979), 11.