

Psalm 42:5

Why are you downcast, O my soul?

A little while ago I had occasion to go and see my doctor

- Though I don't see him often I get on well with my usual doctor
- He's a keen football fan and we always manage a brief word about it
- It just so happened that, apart from my knee which I wondered if I had injured,
- I was actually feeling quite well – nevertheless, I was ready for his cheery question?
- 'Hello, how are you?'
- Many of answer that automatically, 'Fine, thank you!'
- But I was not giving my doctor the satisfaction of answering 'Fine, thank you!'
- So that he could fix me with that knowing look and a twinkle in his eye
- That expresses – what are you doing here then?
- I replied, 'You don't think you're going to catch me out with that, do you?'
- He grinned and all the more so when I suggested that doctors keep score
- To see how many unwitting patients they can catch out in a day

Anglican Bible scholar, Michael Wilcock, suggests that these Psalms, 42 and 43

- Which in all probability were originally one longer Psalm
- Give an honest answer to the question of the spiritual doctor, 'how are you?'
- We might give that nice, polite answer in church, 'Fine, thank you!'
- But if the psalmist were to be asked the question, 'how are you spiritually?'
- I think we could anticipate the reply, 'I feel awful'
- Dividing the two Psalms into three parts, John Goldingay suggests the headings
- 'parched', 'overwhelmed' and 'misjudged'
- Michael Wilcock suggests 'dry', 'drowning' and 'disheartened'
- And with my preference for alliteration I am going to borrow his headings

The Psalm is really about *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*

- A few of you might recognise that as the title of the book by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- Which is more or less a set of transcriptions of sermons preached 50 years ago
- Though it is on my shelf, I have not used that book in my own preparation
- But it is still available and I commend it to the serious reader

Even the word 'depression' needs to be dealt with carefully

- Some people will describe themselves as depressed when they are a bit fed up
- Other people will use the word 'depressed' to mean a bit downhearted
- Few of us have never had a time of feeling fed up or downhearted
- The cure for being fed up or downhearted might be an evening with family or friends
- Or if you are less sociable an evening *without* family and friends
- I am not speaking about 'depression' in that sense – that is just a temporary mood
- Then there is another kind of depression – an oppressive illness
- Where a night out, a big bar of chocolate or an instant remedy for feeling fed up
- Is not going to work at all, any more than a sticking plaster will do for a broken leg
- Depression is a real and most horrible illness – not the sufferer's fault
- I am not speaking about depression in that sense – that is clinical depression
- We are talking here about 'spiritual depression' as we find it in Psalms 42 and 43

*Jesus, we celebrate your victory:
Jesus, we revel in Your love.
Jesus, we rejoice, You've set us free;
Jesus, Your death has brought us life.*

Now that's as good a refrain as we will find in any of the worship songs of the last 30 years

- But we don't sing it here – not because I don't like the chorus
- And not because I don't like the tune but because the words continue like this

His Spirit in us releases us from fear,
The way to Him is open, with boldness we draw near;
And in His presence our problems disappear,
Our hearts responding to His love.

I think I know what the writer, John Gibson, is getting at

- I think he means that when our eyes are fully fixed on Jesus
- That everything else takes on a completely new perspective
- Admittedly, it is hard to scan these longer words with the music
- What we must resist is the popular myth that once you become a Christian
- All your problems disappear – when for many people it's when the problems start
- These Psalms wrestle with struggles that believers face

The ancient Hebrew Scriptures (the Masoretic text) and the Greek translation (Septuagint)

- Have Psalms 42 and 43 as two separate Psalms
- Nevertheless, whereas Psalm 42 has a superscription: For the Director of Music
- A *maskil* of the Sons of Korah
- Psalm 43 does not have any superscription
- The development of the themes suggests that the two Psalms should be one
- But what really swings it for me is the repetition of the refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5)

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my
God.

(Psalm 42:5)

We don't know really know what a *maskil* is, commentators suggest it is a musical term

- And we can't be sure why it is 'of the Sons of Korah'
- Though in one of the genealogies in the book of Chronicles
- The sons of Korah were somehow connected with the service of song
- First at the tabernacle and then at the temple (1 Chronicles 6:31-32)
- The contents of these Psalms suggest a period of exile (to Aram, Assyria or Babylon)
- Where the people of God were in the hands of taunting captors
- The Psalm writer considers his depressed spiritual state – problems don't disappear
- It is not a mood, it is not clinical depression – it is just hard being a believer
- And he considers his spiritual state and concludes, 'I feel awful' – he is:

I DRY
II DROWNING
III DISHEARTENED

I DRY

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

(Psalm 42:1-3)

I think that from time to time, perhaps more regularly than from time to time

- This is the experience of every believer
- The deer (or hart) longs for the water and finding it quenches its thirst
- Here is a believer longing to meet with God and know his blessing
- 'soul' here is not 'soul' as opposed to body – but 'whole being'
- there is a dryness about his spiritual life and he knows it

Most of us will still remember the *Martini* advert – where the advertisers gave us the slogan

- anytime, any place, anywhere
- if you are pleading youth then at least you might have heard of the single by *Carter*
- where can the psalmist go and meet with God – anytime, any place, anywhere
- but that is not his experience – he has, as C. S. Lewis said, 'an appetite for God'
- he knows that God is the living God and he wants to meet with him to see his face
- but all that he has is a sense of alienation from God – tears are his only food
- so much so that the taunts of his enemies are painful
- the clue to the desire of his heart is in the verse that follows:

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

(Psalm 42:4)

Although the psalmist could worship anytime, any place, anywhere

- what he longs for are the mountain top experiences – don't we relate to these?
- Maybe it was the convention, the holiday week, the church weekend
- We felt we were on the mountain top – with the multitude
- Just like the psalmist as he made his way, leading the procession to the Temple
- With shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the other rejoicing worshippers
- As he pours out his soul in prayer to God he remembers these times
- Great times such as the festival processions of Passover, Firstfruits and Tabernacles
- Which we celebrate in a slightly different form as Easter, Pentecost and Harvest
- Yet, times of adversity are a good time for reflection and self-examination

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

(Psalm 42:5-6a)

The psalmist's inner feelings express themselves in questions, despair, and hope in God.

- The questions reflect the reality of his experience, the longing of his heart

For all but a handful of occasions, my family has returned home after morning service

- To traditional Sunday roast dinner, two or three times a year with Christmas pudding
- In our society, though I have known what it is to feel a little peckish
- For most of us feeling really hungry is not a common experience
- It's hard to think of anything positive about feeling really hungry
- But if you wake up feeling really hungry you can be thankful for at least one thing
- You didn't die in the night!

What can we say about the psalmist's hunger, his longing after God?

- I guess one thing we can say is that he is still spiritually alive
- Even in the loneliness of his alienation from God, when he seemed so spiritually dry
- When he looked back to the mountain experiences and he was in a deep valley
- When questions of doubt arose in his mind, the voice of faith answered them
- Put your hope in God, praise him, my Saviour and my God (v. 5)

One thing we must learn is the limitations of focusing on how we might be feeling

- The mountain top experiences, sharing in worship and celebration with crowds
- Are a great joy to every believer – but they must not become the essence of our hope
- If we focus wholly and solely on how we feel we will have up days and down days
- The key has to be to put our hope in God, praise him, Saviour and God
- It is this hope – that God will act - that leads the psalmist away from despair

But the psalmist moves on to another episode of his spiritual depression and woes

II DROWNING

My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon - from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

(Psalm 42:6-7)

Not content with waiting for God to act, the psalmist returns to looking back

- Back to better times – in Jordan and the Mountains of Hermon
- The Psalm began with water imagery – longing for a cool stream from which to drink
- Now the memories of the water are overshadowed by a deep sense of despair
- The cascading torrent of water sweeps over him – a symbol of God's judgment
- Yet even in this he finds something to renew his hope

By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me - a prayer to the God of my life.

(Psalm 42:8)

For the first time the psalmist uses the holy name of God – the LORD (four block capitals)

- This is the covenant God of Israel, the God who has made promises
- By day and night he experienced the evidence of God's care, protection and blessing
- But now his time of praising has become a time of mourning

I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

(Psalm 42:9-10)

It is clear that the psalmist has not lost faith – he still refers to ‘God my Rock’

- It’s just that he is not experiencing what he thinks he should experience
- He cannot understand why he feels as if God has forgotten him
- And the taunts of those around him only make him feel worse
- So much so he feels that he is distressed to the point of dying
- Yet, for a second time, the refrain comes to him

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

(Psalm 42:11)

Despair drives him to self-examination but self-examination drives him to look to God

- To affirm his hope in the future saving acts of God

This year Methodists celebrate the 300th anniversary of the birth of Charles Wesley

- Although a great preacher who, like his brother, travelled for many years
- Charles is chiefly remembered for his hymn-writing – and rightly so
- We are not wrong to think of John and Charles Wesley as giants of the faith
- Yet alongside the great hymns celebrating salvation, coupled with stirring tunes,
- Charles Wesley could write:

Son of God, if thy free grace
Again has raised me up,
Called me still to seek thy face,
And given me back my hope.

(HP 720)

Yet again, the psalmist moves on to another episode of his spiritual depression and woes

III DISHEARTENED

If there is one word that describes the experience of many Christians today it is disheartened

- It is easy to attack declining, apparently fruitless congregations
- And say that it is because of all manner of faithlessness
- But what about declining, apparently fruitless congregations
- Where people appear to be faithful, where the gospel is preached
- But things do not appear to be significantly better – certainly not numerically
- Several times in the post-war years some believers in Britain have been encouraged
- But there is no point denying that Christian work and witness in Britain is very weak
- And that despite some thriving churches, there are now vast areas of the country
- With little or no Christian witness – whereas Methodism hoped to cover every area
- We have retreated from inner cities, social housing, many villages (so have others)

Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

(Psalm 43:1-2)

The psalmist is almost undoubtedly writing during a time of exile

- A period in which the Israelites were displaced to distant lands by foreign oppressors
- In such circumstances, his prayer is that God will vindicate him
- If, in the psalmist's experience, the ungodly nation was a foreign enemy
- That need not prevent us from acknowledging that the ungodly nation is all around us
- Against such adversities, God is our only stronghold

Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

(Psalm 43:3-4)

There is only one answer to the darkness of his adversities – that is the light

- There is only one answer to the deceit of the wicked – that is the truth
- The light of God is the experience of his redemption
- The truth of God is his faithfulness to the promises of his Covenant
- For the Christian these are revealed in person in Jesus

The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

(Matthew 4:16)

Light, grace and truth are revealed in Jesus Christ (John 1:9, 17)

- For us, the Psalmist's original question, 'When can I go and meet with God?'
- Which we answered vaguely, anytime, any place, anywhere
- Is more precisely answered by the Christian, now, here, at the cross
- This is the ultimate revelation of God's strength – hope breaks through

For the third time, the psalmist cries out:

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

(Psalm 43:5)

There is a continual conflict between faith and doubt – but it is a subjective one

- The objective truth (whether we feel it or not) is that God is our Saviour
- And our hope in him, through the Lord Jesus Christ, is well-founded