

Depression is a growing problem in our day. As we noted last week, statistics tell us that every one of us will be affected by it either directly ourselves or by way of relationship with someone who suffers from it. Sometimes depression involves deep biological and neurological causes that require specialist treatment. It's not a matter of simply pulling ourselves together or getting our thinking straight. But all forms of depression, whether the profound illness of clinical depression or the seasons of depression that overtake us in the ordinary course of life, *all* forms of depression tend to issue in patterns of thinking that are prone to doubt and unbelief, to fear and anxiety, to introspection and self-absorption that are simply wrong and spiritually very dangerous. So this is a subject that we need to address ourselves with some diligence and urgency as Christian people.

Now you may recall that last Lord's Day we began to see how the psalmist deals with this whole subject of spiritual depression, beginning in Psalm 42. But as we saw last week, Psalm 42 is only part one. Psalm **43** is the second act in the drama, the second movement in the symphony. Psalm 43 is the second half of the psalmist's treatment of the whole problem of spiritual depression and we need to give attention to it if we are to give an adequate response to this issue in our own lives.

So please turn back there with me.

The psalmist, remember, has been plunged into a deep and penetrating depression. "My tears have been my food day and night," he says in 42:3. His soul is "cast down" and "disquieted," 42: 5, 42: 11, and Psalm 43:5. And remember also that there are two problems lying at the root of his depressed condition. First, he is far from the Temple in Jerusalem where God has promised to meet with His people in corporate worship in a unique way. He says he pours out his soul when he remembers how he used to go up to the house of God to keep the pilgrim feast (42:4). He feels himself far from his God. To him, distance from the public assembly of the people of God, and from the Temple where God's glory and presence dwelt, is a deep loss to this soul. And secondly, he is besieged by enemies who can see his distress and the distance he feels from his God and who capitalize on it, mocking him, and sneeringly asking, in 42:3 and in 42:10, "Where is this God of yours?"

And those twin problems have not gone away in Psalm 43. He still asks in verse 2, "Why have you cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the

oppression of the enemy?” Things are still bad for the psalmist. We don’t see a dramatic change of his outward circumstances here, but what we *do* see is a more focused response to them.

Look at the structure of the Psalm with me for a moment. In verses 1 and 2, the psalmist prays for vindication from God. Then in verses 3-4, he prays for illumination. And then finally in verse 5, he returns to proclamation. That is how he begins to deal with his depression. He *is* still dealing with it. It hasn’t disappeared. He *still* cries out for help and deliverance. The enemy *still* mocks him. God *still* seems far away. ***But he marshals three deliberate strategies by way of response that we need to study and imitate: God’s vindication, God’s illumination, and personal proclamation.*** That is his strategy for dealing with spiritual depression.

Let’s think about the first of them together for a moment. ***He prays for God to vindicate him.*** Look at verses 1 and 2. “Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! For You *are* the God of my strength; Why do You cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”

Now the psalmist really does three things here that I want you to see. He trusts God’s justice, then he argues God’s character, and then finally he inquires about God’s plans. Look how he trusts in God’s justice, first of all.

He is under attack isn’t he? Notice how he characterizes his opponents. They are the ungodly nation, they are deceitful men and unjust men. Ungodly, deceitful, unjust—those are the features of the enemies who surround him and assault him and seek to destroy his trust in his God. These are the kind of men who oppress him. No wonder he is depressed. Who wouldn’t be, surrounded by enemies like these? But what we need to see is how he answers this onslaught. How does he react as enemies assault his faith and attack his assurance and undermine his faith?

It seems simple to say, but great wisdom is often profoundly simple: the psalmist ***turns to God*** for a response to these enemies. He does not seek revenge. He will not give vent to his frustration or try to fight fire with fire or give them a taste of their own medicine. He turns to the Lord.

The ungodly, the deceitful, and the unjust men do their worst, but in response, the psalmist looks ***to God*** alone to answer their attacks. And so in response to the threefold characterization of his opponents, in verse 1, he offers a threefold prayer.

He asks God to vindicate him. Here he wants God to take the role of Judge and pronounce a verdict that will clear him of the slander these men level against him. Then he asks God to plead his cause or take up his argument. Here he is asking God to become his advocate and engage in his defense. And finally he asks God to deliver him. He is asking God to step in and be his rescuer.

As the ungodly, deceitful, and wicked oppose him, he turns to the Judge, Advocate, and Deliverer of his soul for protection and defense. And that is an extremely important principle for us to understand. It's a principle Paul articulates in Romans 12:19-21: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

When we are hard pressed, opposed, and treated unjustly and depression overwhelms us as a result, the only options are not revenge or silent suffering. We can feel trapped by those two options, can't we? ***There is another way.*** Entrust yourself to God, the Judge, Advocate, and Deliverer who will repay evil with His fiery wrath in due time. The best way to fight injustice is not with anger or spite but with love. Do not overcome evil with evil but overcome evil with good. Look to God. Trust Him and commit your way to Him. He is the Vindicator. He will plead your case. He will fight your corner, and He will deliver you.

The psalmist finds refuge in the Judge Advocate, and Deliverer of his soul. Of course, what he is really doing is looking to the gospel-grace of God, which is brought into perfect focus for us finally in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Christ becomes the one who, by His death and resurrection, delivers us from the assaults and accusations of the great enemy of our souls, Satan himself. Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, is our Advocate who pleads our cause before the throne of heavenly judgment and ever lives to make intercession for us. Whatever lies Satan whispers to our consciences, whatever case he can legitimately build against us as he points out our sin, Jesus pleads His blood on our behalf before the only court that really matters. And because of Jesus the great verdict has already been pronounced for everyone who clings to Him. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are vindicated, justified in the sight of God, counted righteous in Christ. He is our deliverer.

It is critically important if we suffer depression, with all the self recrimination and self accusation that comes along with it, to lay a firm hold of those great gospel truths. Whatever reproach your consciences pour upon you, whatever guilt you carry, if you trust in Christ, God vindicates you. You are righteous in His sight. That is the truth about you. Jesus died and rose. He pleads for you. He delivers you. You are safe and loved and justified in the sight of God. That is who you really are. Believing the gospel pulls the sting of satanic self recrimination and silences the unjust accusations of the enemy.

And the second thing to see about this prayer for vindication is that *he argues God's character*. He does not simply ask for vindication, he *argues*. *Here is the secret and the art of great praying. Build arguments with God.* Look how the psalmist does it. "For You *are* the God of my strength; Why do You cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

"This is who you are God: the God of my strength". The Hebrew word for "strength" used there is the word for a fortress or a defensive stronghold. He is saying to God, "You are my fortress, my strong tower, my stronghold against the enemy. That is who you are. I find refuge in You." And then he says, "so if that is true, if you are my secure hiding place, my defensive stronghold, if I can find safety in you— why have you cast me off—verse 2, why do I still go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

Now he is not complaining here. He is not doubting or despairing. He is *arguing*. He is saying to God, "*This* is what You are like. *This* is your character. *This* is who you are, so *display* yourself faithful to *yourself*. *Show* that You are who You have *said* You are. You are my refuge and my strength? Then *be* my refuge *now*, oh, Lord." Do you pray like that? Here is how to pray in the trenches of daily battle with spiritual depression. Build arguments based on the character of God Himself. Plead His own righteousness and faithfulness and goodness and love. Hold God to His own revealed nature, and with holy boldness, press Him to be who He has declared Himself to be in His Word, now, in the details of your case.

He trusts God's justice, he argues God's character and the third part of his prayer for vindication is to inquire about God's plans. Look at verse 2 again. He asks, "Why do you cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" The psalmist asks for an explanation, for some rhyme or reason to his sufferings. It is not wrong to wonder what God is doing and why. It is not wrong to

ask confused questions when dark providences afflict you. But we can learn from the psalmist the correct direction for our enquiries.

“Learn from this question,” says Spurgeon on this verse, “that it is well to inquire into dark providences, but we must inquire of **God, not of our own fears**. He who is the **author** of a mysterious trial can best expound it to us.” And then he quotes William Cowper’s hymn,

“Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his works in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
and He will make it plain.”

(Spurgeon, *Treasurey of David, Vol. I, 293*, emphasis mine)

That is a crucial discipline for a depressed soul. It is good to inquire about dark providences. It’s not wrong to ask the “why” question, but we must learn to ask it of **God and not of our own fears**. We must learn to trust God who is His own interpreter to make plain His reasons and purposes for every trial and providence in His time and in His way. Some trials will remain a mystery ‘till glory. But with some we will begin to see parts, at least, of the divine design and discover the wisdom and love of our Father, who works all things together, even our sore afflictions, for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

So the psalmist prays for **vindication**. Next, in verses 3-4, he prays for **Illumination**.

Look at the text again. “Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle. Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God.”

Now, here is his response to the second root of his depression. The first was the attacks of the enemy. Against this he has learned to pray for vindication, plead God’s character and inquire about God’s plans. Now he turns to address his distance from the Temple and from the display of God’s presence there. He longs to be in the place where God has promised to meet with sinners. So he prays for the guidance of divine illumination in verse 3, and in verse 4, he outlines how he will respond to such illumination.

He can't see how he will get back to Jerusalem from the land beyond the Jordan and from Mizar Hill. He has been providentially hindered and can see no obvious way to get home. But once again notice where he looks with his difficulty. When there is oppression, he turns to God for deliverance and vindication. Now when there are unfathomable difficulties and barriers, he looks to God for guidance and illumination. "Oh send Your light forth and Your truth! Let them lead me, Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your tabernacle."

He wants God's truth and the light it gives to illuminate his path and guide his steps. When fellowship with God is broken, when in our depression we feel distant from God, the prayer to utter is this one. The way back into communion with God is always by His light and His truth, which is simply to say that the path into the presence of the Lord is by means of His Word. Pray, "Oh Lord, so wield Your Word in my heart that I might be led by it into restored fellowship with You. Send Your light forth and Your truth and lead me to Your holy hill."

Too many of us feel far from God and long for some sense of His presence and wonder why He is so distant, but we continue to neglect the light and truth of God's revealed will. We pray for some experience of spiritual intimacy, yet we leave the Word of God aside and neglect its message. If you are to be led to the hill of the Lord, it will only be by means of the Word.

And look how the psalmist will respond, when God brings him back to the Temple. He says He will do two things: he will go to the altar of God, and he will praise God on the harp. He is a son of Korah, remember. This is his priestly calling. He is a Levite whose job it is to play the instruments and lead the singing of God's people before the altar of God in the Temple of God.

But it seems clear, doesn't it, that for this son of Korah going to the altar and playing his harp is much more than a matter of professional obligation. It is the response of his worshiping heart to the illumination and guidance of God from his word.

The first thing he does is go directly, verse 4, to the altar of God. Now just notice the parallelism in these two lines for a moment, "Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy." I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy. He is equating going to the altar with going to God here, isn't he?

That is important. The only way to go to God is to go to the altar. There is no access to God, no worship that can please God, no fellowship between a sinner and God apart from the sacrificial ministry of the altar of God. In the temple, the blood of bulls and goats was offered unceasingly for the sin of the people to propitiate God's wrath, satisfy His justice and reconcile them to God. But those temple sacrifices were merely pictures, gruesome dramatizations of the final sacrifice, the one by which our sins were truly washed away and God's wrath truly satisfied. They point to the Cross of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. As Hebrews 9:11- 14 explains "Christ came... not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the *flesh*, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, *cleanse your conscience* from dead works to serve the living God?"

The psalmist knows that, if he is to go to God, he must go to His altar. We know if we are to go to God, we must go to the altar, too. We must go to the place of sacrifice. We must go to Jesus Christ. There is no access to God except through Him. He died to deal with our sin and open a way of access to us by faith alone.

If we are going to deal with the sense of distance from God that often accompanies depression, we must ensure that we do not neglect God's light and truth, His Word. And we must go back again to the cross. We must linger over the altar. We must contemplate the Savior. We will never know the joy of salvation restored until we recapture a vision of the ground of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Andrew Bonar says of this verse, "The highest gladness comes from the altar with its accepted sacrifice. Christ risen and ascended are pointed out therein, and it is in His resurrection and ascension that we see the sacrifice accepted, and our hearts learn true joy." (Bonar, *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms*, 141)

The fruits of illumination, of seeing the truth of God in the Word of God, is restored fellowship with God by way of the altar, by way of the cross of Christ. Only the accepted sacrifice of Christ can re-ignite and sustain our joy when worldly source of joy are missing and every reason for sorrow in this world surrounds us. So much of our joylessness is because we look to our circumstances, our relationships, our accomplishments; we look to creatures and created things for our joy, and all they can give at best is fleeting happiness. True joy, the psalmist says, is located in God Himself. "God, my exceeding joy", he calls Him. You can only find that joy in God

when you study the cross of Jesus Christ. Those who know the wounds of the Savior best know what it means to call God my exceeding joy even while the enemy continue to oppress and providence continues to frown. If you locate your joy in stuff rather than in the Savior, in creatures rather than Christ, it will be fleeting at best. But go to God via the altar of Christ crucified, and you will discover a well of joy that cannot ever run dry.

He prays for vindication, and for illumination. And then finally, as we've seen before, he engages in proclamation, in verse 5. I don't want to say much on this here since we dealt with it in the previous sermon. But listening to the psalmist take himself in hand reminded me of the movie "A Beautiful Mind."

Have you seen that movie? Russell Crowe plays Nobel Prize winning economist John Nash, who suffered from a profound psychological disorder. He saw things that were not there. Heard voices. It almost unhinged him. Towards the end of the movie he is asked if he is better now to which he replies,

"I still see things that are not here. I just choose not to acknowledge them. Like a diet of the mind, I just choose not to indulge certain appetites." *That's* it! That is what we must begin to learn and grasp. We need "a diet of the mind." We need to refuse certain appetites and certain patterns of thought. We must say "no" to the lies we tell ourselves and begin instead to preach gospel truth instead.

"Why are you downcast o my soul? Ad why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, my Savior and my God."

How must we respond to the depression of our hearts? Pray for *vindication*, knowing that in Jesus the verdict has been pronounced and whatever the enemy says you are counted righteous in God's sight. Pray for *illumination* and discover how the Word of God leads you back into fellowship with God by way of the altar, the Cross of Christ. Because of Him, God can be, and will remain, your exceeding joy. And finally preach the gospel to yourself. In Christ, God is your savior and your God forever.

Amen.