

Psalms

Week 7: Hope When the Soul Is Downcast -- Psalms 42–43

Some mornings the heaviness is there before you even open your eyes. Nothing in particular has gone wrong, or perhaps everything has, but either way the soul feels like a stone. The prayers that used to come easily now feel like talking to the ceiling. Worship that once stirred you leaves you cold. You go through the motions, you smile at the right moments, and underneath it all a quiet voice keeps asking where God went and whether the joy you used to feel is ever coming back. If you have lived in that gray country, even for a season, then Psalms 42 and 43 will read like a letter from someone who has been exactly where you are.

The poet behind these twin psalms (they are really one song in two parts, sharing the same aching refrain) is a worship leader cut off from the place and the people he loves. He remembers how he used to go to the house of God “with glad shouts and songs of praise,” and the memory only sharpens the pain of the present. His tears have become his food day and night. People around him keep asking, with a sneer, “Where is your God?” And he is honest enough to admit that he is asking the same question himself.

But watch what this downcast believer does, because it is one of the most important moves in all of Scripture. He starts talking to himself. “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.” He does not simply listen to the despairing voice inside; he answers it. He preaches truth back to his own heart. Three times the refrain returns, like a man steadying himself, again and again, on the only ground that will hold: hope in God.

This week we learn what to do when the soul is downcast and God feels far away, not by pretending the darkness isn’t real, but by learning to thirst for God in the middle of it and to preach His truth back to our own discouraged hearts. The honesty of these psalms is permission for your own. Read Psalms 42 and 43 slowly. And if your soul is heavy as you read, know that the poet who wrote them found his way back to the God of his life, and so can you.

Group Discussion: The psalmist speaks honestly to his own soul: “Why are you cast down, O my soul... Hope in God” (42:5, 11; 43:5). Rather than simply wallowing in his discouragement or pretending it away, he preaches truth back to his own heart. Why do we so rarely talk to ourselves this way, and what is the difference between merely listening to our feelings and actively speaking truth to them?

Personal Reflection: The psalmist remembers better days of worship and longs to feel God’s nearness again, even as people taunt, “Where is your God?” (42:3–4). Have you walked through a season when God felt distant and your faith felt dry? What did you do with that season, and what would it look like to thirst for God in the middle of it rather than waiting for the feeling to return on its own?

Study Questions

1. The psalm opens, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (42:1–2). What does it tell us about how we were made that the deepest thirst of the human soul is for God Himself, and how does this longing both expose our emptiness and point us to where true satisfaction is found?
2. The psalmist’s “tears have been my food day and night,” and he remembers how he “used to go” to worship with “glad shouts and songs of praise” (42:3–4). When have you looked back on a season of closeness to God that you no longer feel? How did that memory affect you, with longing, with grief, with hope, or with a mix of all three?
3. Three times the psalmist repeats the refrain, “Why are you cast down, O my soul... Hope in God; for I shall again praise him” (42:5, 11; 43:5). What does it teach us that he speaks truth to his own soul rather than simply listening to it, and why is hope here something he chooses and rehearses rather than merely a feeling he waits to receive?
4. The psalmist does not deny his feelings, but neither does he let them rule him; he answers them with truth. What does the despairing voice inside you tend to say when you are low, and what specific truths about God would you need to preach back to it? Be concrete about both the lie and the truth.
5. Even in his lowest moment the psalmist preaches to himself, “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me” (42:8). How can a believer be sure of God’s steadfast love even when they cannot feel His presence, and why must our assurance rest on God’s revealed character rather than on the rise and fall of our emotions?
6. The psalmist asks, “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning?” (42:9), bringing his confusion straight to God. When God feels distant, do you tend to pull away from prayer and worship, or press into them? What would it look like to keep seeking God precisely when you feel least like it?
7. In 43:3–4 the psalmist prays, “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me... Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.” He longs not merely for relief but for God Himself as his “exceeding joy.” What does it mean that God, and not merely the lifting of our circumstances, is meant to be our highest joy, and how does the New Covenant give us access to God’s presence the psalmist could only long for?
8. The psalmist’s hope is fixed on a future certainty: “I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (43:5). When you are in a dark season, do you live as though it will last forever, or do you hold on to the certainty that you will praise God again? What helps you keep that future hope in view when the present feels endless?
9. The psalmist thirsts for the “living God” and longs to come into His presence at the altar (42:2; 43:4), yet he is kept at a distance. How does Jesus answer the deepest longing of these psalms, both as the One who offers living water that satisfies the thirsty soul and as the One whose death opened the way into God’s presence, and what difference does His resurrection make for the believer whose soul is downcast?

10. Look back across both psalms, from the panting thirst of the opening to the steady refrain, “Hope in God.” Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through them. What is the single truth from Psalms 42 and 43 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 4:13–14, the living water Jesus gives that becomes a spring welling up to eternal life; John 7:37–39, the invitation for the thirsty to come to Christ and drink; Lamentations 3:19–26, hope rekindled by remembering the steadfast love of the Lord; Philippians 4:4–9, the peace of God guarding hearts that turn worry into prayer; Hebrews 10:19–23, confidence to enter God’s presence through the blood of Jesus.