

“A Prescription for the Soul”
Sermon Series – Learning to Pray the Psalms
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Psalm 42)

Introduction.

Last Wednesday our church staff gathered together for our annual calendar planning day. Only ten of us could physically be present in the fellowship hall because of restrictions (and we were appropriately social distancing and wearing masks), and the others on staff joined in via Zoom for the meeting. Obviously, this wasn't ideal, and it was very different from our calendar planning days in the past when all of us could be together. In addition, the pandemic we've all been living through has taken an emotional and spiritual toll on our staff, just it has with you and your colleagues at work as well as the members of your family.

So we decided to begin the meeting with a little laughter and some good humor. The week before the meeting we invited everyone to submit their favorite Covid-19 joke or meme, and Teresa on our staff put together a deck of slides which we showed to start off our time together. Here are a few of them for your viewing pleasure, and I hope you get as much fun out of them as we did.

Proverbs 17:22 says, *“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”* There is something about laughter which lifts our spirits and lightens the heavy burdens we carry, and sharing these jokes and memes proved to be just the prescription our staff needed to help us cope with these challenging times.

Psalm 42 also provides a good prescription for the soul, and this morning we're going to study it together. I pray it provides good medicine for your spirit as you deal with all we're going through during this pandemic.

I. The Condition.¹

The writer of Psalm 42 begins by talking about the spiritual condition in which he finds himself, and he describes a spiritual malady we all face at one time or another in the Christian life, namely spiritual dryness. He writes, *“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. Where can I go and meet with God?”* (42:1,2).

The writer of this psalm begins with a metaphor which gets at the heart of the problem of spiritual dryness. The psalmist describes a deer which has come down to the place it usually goes in order to get water – a river or a stream – only to find that the riverbed is dry and there isn't any water. The psalmist is saying, “I'm like the deer, and God is like the dry riverbed. My soul feels parched and dry, and I'm thirsty for God.”

Tim Keller says that when you began your journey of faith one thing no one probably ever told you was that spiritual droughts would be a part of your experience in Christ at some point in life. I suspect that no one ever said to you when you became a Christian, “Hey, get ready for 'dry' spells. They're going to happen.” No one warned you about these things when you first

became a Christian because they didn't want to discourage your new life in Christ.

But chances are pretty good that it didn't take long until you came to a point when you didn't "feel" God's presence, or experience His nearness, quite like you once did. If you live long enough in the Christian life, you're going to have a moment in your journey of faith when you will feel just like the writer of this psalm did. There are dry periods in every Christian's life, and if it hasn't happened to you up till now, it eventually will.

The writer of Psalm 42 mentions another aspect of his spiritual condition, and it is emotional discouragement. Three times in this short poem the author asks the question, "*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?*" (42:5). The word "downcast" means to be low in spirit, or to be dejected. It's the feeling we have when we're emotionally depressed. The Hebrew word which is translated "downcast" in this passage is the word *shachach*, and it literally means "to collapse, like when someone bends over sobbing in deep grief, or when the walls of a conquered city are laid low."

There are many famous people in the Bible who experienced spiritual discouragement. For example, in 1 Kings 19 Elijah asked God to just let him die after Jezebel put a price on his head. Moses did as well in Numbers 11 when the people complained about his leadership. And the prophet Jonah asked God to take his life when, against his wishes, the Lord had mercy on Jonah's enemies in the city of Nineveh. In addition, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mother Teresa all battled spiritual depression. If you're having a problem with this right now, you're in good company.

Life can be discouraging at times. When you're struggling with a problem, when family members don't know the Lord, when you can't pay your bills, when doing school is difficult, when your health is failing, when the future is uncertain, or when a friend betrays you, it's easy to be discouraged, isn't it?

Discouragement is a thief. It steals your vitality, your joy, and your peace. And if discouragement lives in your house for very long, its friends will soon move in and take up residence too. Their names are hopelessness, despair, self-pity, and doubt. And sometimes, discouragement can be so strong you don't even want to go on living, just like Elijah, Moses, and Jonah.

I love how Scripture is honest and authentic. The great saints of the Bible don't candy coat things or look at life through rose colored glasses. They are open and honest about their spiritual struggles and the condition of their souls, just like you and me.

II. The Causes.

There are four causes, or four triggers, for spiritual dryness and discouragement the psalmist mentions in this poem, and the first is a disruption of one's community and worship. He writes, "*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*" (42:4).

The author of this psalm feels the negative effect of no longer being able to gather for worship with other people, and he misses the joy of singing the praise of God with his fellow believers. (Sounds like he was living in Covid-19 too!) In addition, in verse 6 the writer makes a reference Mount Hermon and Mount Mizar which are in the far northern part of Israel. This suggests that the author has moved, and now he lives far away from his community in

Jerusalem and the people with whom he used to worship in the temple.

That's something we can all relate to during this pandemic. While we may not have had to physically move to another part of the country, we've been living in isolation since March and we've experienced a great deal of disruption in our community. In addition, we haven't been able to gather together in worship for far too long. I miss seeing all of you, and I know what a toll this has taken on my spirit. I suspect you're feeling the negative effects of all this too. These things can affect us spiritually and emotionally, so don't be surprised if you've been battling the blues during this time of isolation.

The second cause the psalmist mentions for his spiritual malady is hostility to his faith. Twice the author makes a reference to people who ask him, "Where is your God?" We live in secular, skeptical world that is often hostile to faith, and it's not uncommon for people to question our beliefs and our commitment to Christ. They ask pointed questions like, "If God is so loving and He's all-powerful, then why did He allow Covid-19 to infect the world and kill so many people?" Others with a scientific bent make us feel silly or stupid for holding to our belief in Christ, and they cause us to feel like we're shelving our brains to have faith in God. Still others are critical when they see professing Christians behaving badly, and it exposes all of us to ridicule.

We live in an unbelieving world more and more every single day, and the hostility to our faith can wear us down, just as it did the psalmist. Intellectual debates, a growing suspicion about faith, and the lack of support we feel for what we believe can drain us and lead to spiritual dryness. All this contributes to our spiritual condition.

The third cause the psalmist mentions is a loss of purpose. In verse 4 he makes reference to leading the procession to the house of the Lord with shouts of joy and thanksgiving. It appears that the author of this psalm was a worship leader, and he was perhaps responsible for creating and leading the worship services celebrated in the temple. This psalm mentions the sons of Korah in the title, and we learn from 1 Chronicles 9 that they were musicians who led the worship of God. For some reason he was no longer able to do this, and it led to a loss of purpose. He no longer knew where he belonged in the world and what he was supposed to do, and he was struggling with his calling in life.

Have you ever felt like that? At one time you knew who you were and exactly what you were supposed to do, but then all of a sudden, the rug was pulled out from under you. Your boss told you the company was downsizing; they no longer needed you. Your spouse said he didn't want to be married anymore. Your kids grew up and moved away, and the season you spent raising them came to an end. "What am I supposed to do now?" we wonder. "I don't know who I am anymore." All this can lead to spiritual dryness and emotional discouragement.

A final cause the psalmist mentions is his physical condition. "*My tears have been my food day and night*" (42:3). In other words, the writer is saying he has lost his appetite, and the only thing he's eating is his tears. In addition, he's having trouble sleeping, and his sadness keeps him awake at night. You won't be able to deal with your overall spiritual condition if you ignore that there is a physical aspect to it.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones was a famous preacher in the UK in the last century, but he was also a medical doctor and practiced medicine before he went to seminary. Once he preached a great sermon on this psalm, which later was turned into a book, and he talked about the interconnectedness of the body, mind, and the spirit when thinking about spiritual depression.

He wrote about Elijah who had his own battle with the spiritual blues, and he pointed out how an angel of the Lord urged Elijah to get some rest, and he also fed him a meal to help address the prophet's physical hunger. Fatigue, hunger, and illness all factor into our emotional and spiritual well-being.

In summary, we see in this psalm that there are at least four causes to spiritual dryness and discouragement – a disruption in our community and worship, hostility to our faith, a loss of our sense of purpose, and the physical condition of our bodies. You and I would do well to attend to these causes whenever we encounter a dark night of the soul and we're battling the spiritual doldrums. It is important to identify the cause, and it can help lead to the cure.

III. The Cure.

Well, what's the cure? How can we overcome the spiritual malady the psalmist writes about? The author gives us the answer in his poem, and there are three things he suggests we do. First, he recommends we pour out our hearts to God. *"These things I remember as I pour out my soul" (v. 4).* Notice that despite his statement that people are asking him, "Where is your God" the psalmist is praying an intense, sustained, and eloquent prayer. Even though he doesn't feel like God is present in his life, and even though he's spiritually dry, the writer keeps talking to God. That is so important to do.

To pour out your soul means to get in touch with your feelings. It means to take an honest look at your doubts, desires, fears, and hopes. However, it's not just an abstract self-examination. Rather, it's a prayer. It is trying to expose the inner-self to God and coming before Him with the raw and honest candor of your pain. Don't worry. God can take it. He's got broad shoulders. And He would rather hear the honest complaint of your heart than to suffer your silence or indifference.

The second cure the psalmist mentions is to preach to yourself. Give yourself a good talking-to. One of the most remarkable things about this psalm is that the author not only talks to God, he also talks to himself. *"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God" (v. 5).*

Learning to preach to yourself is a critical skill we all need to learn. Dr. Lloyd-Jones writes, "We must learn to take ourselves in hand. We must talk to ourselves instead of allowing ourselves to talk to us. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to your self instead of talking to it? So the psalmist stands up and says, 'Self, listen here for a moment.' And then he reminds himself of who God is, what He has done, and how God has pledge Himself to us. Defy the devil and the whole world and say with this man, 'I shall yet praise Him for He is my God!'"²

The final cure the psalmist suggests is to put your hope in God. Another way of saying this is to reorder your hopes. If part of the positive self-talk the psalmist recommends is for him to put his hope in God then it must mean that he is downcast partly because he's been putting his hope in something else. Spiritual dryness and discouragement can reveal to us the idols of our hearts, and it's not uncommon for spiritual problems to happen whenever we're disappointed in life or our hopes have been dashed.

If you put your hope in anything or anyone other than God, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. God is the only one you can really count on in this life in an ultimate way, and

all these other things and people in life we place our hope in will never be able to meet your expectations or satisfy the longings of the human heart like only Jesus can. Put your hope in God. He is the cure for the spiritual malady of your heart.

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweet frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ the solid Rock I stand.
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand.³

Conclusion.

In times of spiritual dryness, it's easy to feel like God has lost track of you, or even worse that He is, in fact, against you. But nothing could be further from the truth. God is *for* you. Never doubt that. Whenever you are spiritually discouraged, think about Jesus and read this psalm in light of His experience on the cross. Whenever you experience spiritual dryness, remember Jesus was the one who cried out from the cross and said, "*I thirst*" (Jn. 19:28).

Whenever you wonder, "Where is your God?" remember Jesus had enemies who taunted Him by saying, "*Where is your God now? He trusts in God. Let God rescue Him*" (Mt. 27:42,43). And whenever you feel abandoned, remember Jesus hung on the cross between heaven and earth, and He cried out, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?*" (Mt. 27:46). Jesus has been there before, and He is the ultimate cure for your spiritual condition.

In spite of your failures and inadequacies, God will never give up on you. He loves you with an everlasting love, and He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to give you new life in Him. Put your hope in Christ. He's the answer you are looking for. Jesus is the best Prescription a person can get to heal our spiritual maladies, in the middle of a pandemic or any time in your life. It's even better than a joke or a meme. Amen.

¹ I'm indebted to Tim Keller for the outline of the sermon and many of the insights of my message.

² This is a paraphrase of what D. Martin Lloyd-Jones writes in *Spiritual Depression: It's Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 20-21.

³ Edward Mote, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," 1834.