

## ***Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure***

Our second Scripture is the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, composed by someone who was in distress because of his exile from the beloved temple in Jerusalem, the center of worship and the destination of the pilgrimages of devout Jews. The psalmist is engaged in an intense dialogue with God that evidences a great spiritual thirst for deliverance from spiritual depression. He may have been looking toward the headwaters of the Jordan River on Mt Hermon, expressing his deep longing for God.

### **I'll read Psalm 42:**

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
2 My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?  
3 My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"  
4 These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help 6 and my God.  
My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.  
7 Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.  
8 By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.  
9 I say to God, my rock,  
"Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?"*

*10 As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”  
11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

While most of the Scriptures speak *to* us, many of the Psalms speak *for* us, expressing our thoughts, prayers and emotions, including negative ones. The Psalms give their blessings to honest lamentations, expressing for us our emotions of fear, anger and anxiety, and our thoughts of guilt, doubt and bewilderment. One of the reasons that the Psalms are so popular and beloved is the fact that they resonate with so many human emotions and assure us that God welcomes our honest expressions of doubt, anger and, as with our passage today, our spiritual depression.

In all likelihood, if all the statistics I've been reading are anywhere close to accurate, when I speak about spiritual and emotional depression I'm speaking to a condition that affects about a fourth of this congregation at this present time. Emotional depression is known by psychologists as “the common cold” among psychological disorders and that “Christians, though they find hope in their relationship with Jesus, are not exempt from struggling with this painful and serious problem,” which afflicts between thirty to forty million Americans (A Kreger). Josh McDowell lists as possible causes of depression: biological factors (PMS, postpartum, glandular disorders, etc.); helplessness to remedy an intolerable situation (a difficult marriage, loss of a loved one); parental rejection; abuse; negative thinking; stress; anger, and guilt.

No one is exempt from spiritual depression, not even your pastor! So, I'll be the last person to condemn you for being spiritually depressed. Although we're liable to suffer depression, we're not condemned to remain there. God comes to us in his word today to show us the way to overcome spiritual depression. The picture in our text is of a desperate deer, seeking water for his thirst. The psalmist realizes that he suffers from a drought of his soul and the only cure for his spiritual depression is found in God.

At Jacob's Well, Jesus met a woman who is representative of the human condition. She had tried to slake her God-given thirst at a dry well of futility—through finding the perfect relationship with a man. And man after man (for a total of six) had disappointed her and left her with an unquenched thirst, a dry soul. And so Jesus told her about a spring of water that would be the source of eternal and soul-satisfying life. Through a relationship with God she would find that true and everlasting satisfaction for which she had unwittingly longed (Jn. 4:13f).

Spiritual depression is the natural condition of any and every person who's in need of the source of living water, a soul-satisfying relationship with the living God. The unbeliever may be unaware of that thirst, and finds temporary relief in physical pleasures and personal pursuits and other efforts at self-fulfillment. In the midst of his spiritual depression the psalmist, whom we can assume knew God as the only source of true satisfaction, cried out in lamentation over his thirst for God. He expressed his longing for the satisfaction he had found but somehow how lost during his pilgrimage of faith.

We don't know the circumstances of the psalmist, but there seems to be a progression in his misery. First, the psalmist senses that the God he had known and had called upon in the past was now far away. Literally, he was far away from the temple in Jerusalem, which was thought to be the focal point of the presence of God. And spiritual depression is likely to come upon us when God seems far away. We find ourselves longing for "the good old days," maybe when we first came to the "temple," when we were joyful, young believers.

At first, it seemed that God was answering one prayer after another. And since then, we have experienced, disappointments in unanswered prayer and, as Larry Crabb says, "shattered dreams," which are likely to come to every child of God. In fact, Crabb, a counselor and psychologist, says that "Answered prayer seems to be more frequently reported among younger Christians." New Christians need the assurance of God's presence, Crabb explains, and the more we mature the more God allows testing to come to our lives to wean us away from dependence on a "pleasant life." "Live long enough, Crabb writes, "and important dreams will shatter."

Some often believe that once they become a follower of Christ, they've found "the good life," and that God is committed to making life more pleasant and successful. But that's not what Jesus promised as "abundant life." The abundant life is one filled with spiritual blessings, the kind that make us more like Christ and that enables us to live a cruciform life of hope, not blessings that make this mortal life more comfortable. God loves us so much that he is willing to allow our earthly dreams, even good ones that we thought would honor God, to be shattered, so that we might seek him instead of pursuing our personal dreams.

Perhaps you're experiencing circumstances that have made God seem far away. Maybe you prayed for something or someone that ended in disappointment. Maybe your prayers for your marriage, your health or your rebellious child have gone unanswered. It seems that God is far away, that the encouragement and support you used to receive from your personal prayer and corporate worship are no longer there. Possibly, if you're like me, you suffer from not thinking you're good enough. You don't measure up to other's and even your own expectations of yourself, still trying to please others. And so, your soul is downcast.

In the second stanza (42:6-10), the psalmist expresses an even deeper depression when he thinks that God has forgotten him. The irony is, he remembered God (42:4,6), but God forgot him (42:9). At first he suffered thirst of soul (42:1f): he was desperately dry, but now he is drowning in trouble, overwhelmed by life's waterfalls and waves (42:7).

The psalmist was a believer and, if given a theological or biblical exam he would have answered that he believed in God and in his love, power and sovereignty. But because of his circumstances, perhaps more shattered dreams, it certainly feels like God has forgotten him. Perhaps now the psalmist has begun to be overwhelmed by illness, pain and adversity. When pain begins to wreak its havoc upon our emotions, it seems that God has simply forgotten us.

God loves us too much to always come to our rescue and answer every prayer and meet every felt need in our lives. He practices a "severe mercy" and sometimes a tough love, allowing us to go through trials. His purpose perhaps is to wean us from dependence on lesser things and draw us away from the distractions of our personal pursuits, pleasures and self-directed agendas. We cry to him out of our illness for healing or for other help and he seems to have forgotten we're his children.

We may feel abandoned, but the Son was actually abandoned by the Father during that eternity of three hours of darkness when he cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Jesus was forsaken on the cross. The eternal Son was for the first moment in all eternity separated from the love of the Father in order to guarantee that we'll never be separated from the Father's love. When we, during our times of depression over our shattered dreams, are tempted to think we are forsaken, we need to look to the cross.

God loves us so much he'll take us all the way to the "brink" if that's what it takes for us to abandon ourselves to him, to relinquish our hold on lesser desires that keep us from loving God fully. We'll not be forsaken, but we'll likely feel forsaken, which may be the "fellowship of sharing in his (Christ's) sufferings," which Paul desired as a necessary part of knowing Christ fully (Phil. 3:10).

Just when we think we can take no more, that the waves are just about to drown us, God will deliver us, just as he delivered his Son from his suffering and death on the cross to his glorious resurrection. The psalmist cried out for God to vindicate him and rescue him from the wicked (43:1). As was true for him, our deliverance is assured through the victory of Christ in our behalf. We're more than conquerors through him (Rom. 8:37), and our conquest is over the real enemy—Satan. Others that oppose us and those who despise us are not the real enemy, but are instead simply dupes of the devil.

As we note in these three refrains, the psalmist seems to stop himself in his tracks and confronts himself with this repeated question: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” It’s possible to get “bogged down” in our spiritual depression, with obsessive introspection, which can lead to morbidity. Instead of introspection we need, like the psalmist, to engage in a healthy self-examination. The psalmist actually preaches to himself (Lloyd-Jones). And likewise, we too must say to our soul, “Why are you downcast”?

It’s important to know our physical condition, since depression can be connected with our health. There are times when we may well need to see a doctor or professional counselor, if we think our depression may be physical or psychosomatically related and beyond our coping power. Likewise, more children, young people and adults than ever before, Christians included, suffer from childhood traumas associated with neglect or abuse. There may also be struggles with one’s sexual identity and other problems that might require the care and counsel of a professional. We also need to be aware of personality types and characteristic predisposition to melancholia and then adjust our lives accordingly. Some simply need more support from professionals, friends and a strong Christian social network.

There are some common sense things we can do to counter proclivity to depression, such as proper sleep and rest, healthy diet and adequate exercise and enjoyable recreation and friendships. Of course, maintaining the spiritual disciplines of worship, Scripture reading and meditation, fellowship and service in the Body of Christ (which may necessitate reconciliation with alienated brothers and sisters in Christ) are all antidotes to spiritual depression.

But likely, we usually need to get alone with God. “Put your hope in God,” the psalmist tells himself three times. God loves us supremely, and he doesn’t want us to hurt. Yet, he’ll allow us to hurt if our pain draws us to his grace and to a deeper love relationship with him. Spiritual depression can become an occasion of discovering a deeper joy in God than we have ever known before.

There’s often been a settled peace in my heart that sustained me when I fell into spiritual depression. I was able to hear from God, trusting that he would lead me, which indeed he did. Although God didn’t speak to me audibly or through an angel, the word of God gave me encouragement. Even if angry with God, if we are still before him, a new God-awareness will lift us from our depression. We’ll be reminded that he’s our Savior, the Christ of the cross, who desires that we draw nearer to him, trusting in his loving purpose for us. His love and grace and delight in us will see to it that we abandon lesser enjoyments to find our true enjoyment in him. Our God loves us so much that in his holy zeal and jealousy he will not accept a secondary place in our hearts. He demands that we love him above all other loves and enjoy him above all other enjoyment.

The primary, most consistent emotion that we're to experience is joy, which is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22f). We're commanded to rejoice in the Lord always (Phil. 4:4); and joy was a dominant emotion that characterized the disciples in the earliest church. They even rejoiced in the privilege of suffering disgrace and punishment for their faithful witness to Jesus (Acts 5:41). No doubt the joy of those earliest Christians was a big part of their appeal to the lost world around them.

Those with great earthly, temporal, material and physical (even good health) blessings, what we might term as good fortune, are not the most blessed people. Even those of us who belong to God's kingdom as his redeemed children might tend to think that these with happier circumstances are the blessed ones. But the psalmist discovered and we too also will eventually realize that the most blessed people are those who have been driven into the arms of a loving God in desperate dependence, who find our greatest delight, joy and pleasure in him alone. If we only knew how much the Father loves us!