

Looking Up When We Are Cast Down

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to be looking at Psalm 42 and 43 this evening. It's a psalm I've turned to many times in my life. A psalm I've turned to many times with other people.

And my aim in some ways this evening isn't that we have a comprehensive knowledge of this psalm, but hopefully you'll be able to turn back to it in the future. It'll be a lifeline maybe for you in different times that has been for me.

You might notice I said Psalm 42 and 43 and I'm talking about them as one psalm. Just before we read it, as we go through, you'll notice there's a repeated chorus in verse 42 verse 5, 42 verse 11, and 43 verse 5.

So this is one psalm originally. It's been made into two psalms. So we're going to deal with it and look at it as one psalm. So let's read both of those psalms together then.

Psalm 42 and 43. To the choir master, a mask of the sons of Korah. As a dear pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.

[1 : 1 4] My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, where is your God?

These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.

Why you cast down, O my soul, and why you intermoil within me? Open God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember you, from the land of Jordan and of Herman, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep, at the roar of your waterfalls, all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me?

[2 : 1 8] Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with the deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all day long, where is your God?

Why you cast down, O my soul, and why you intermoil within me? Open God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

Give me, O God, and defend my cause against ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me. For you are the God in whom I take refuge, why have you rejected me?

Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? Send out your light and your truth, let them lead me, let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to guard my exceeding joy, and I'll praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Why you cast down, O my soul, and why you intermoil within me?

[3 : 19] Open God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. I don't know what your first reaction was when you read that psalm.

Mine was that this, it sounds very real, doesn't it? This psalm isn't written by someone who hasn't lived in this world, who has, this is a psalm written by someone who has walked this world, who has felt the pains, who is like many of us.

They understand what it's like to live in a world that is full of scars and suffering. They've wrestled with this suffering, they're trying to talk themselves through it, they're trying to put it into words, they're trying to express how they feel.

I think the questions in the chorus really sum it up, doesn't it? They're talking to themselves, it's like they're standing back from themselves and reasoning with themselves. Why you cast down, O my soul, why you intermingle within me?

Open God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. Just in that chorus we get this tension. The person's reasoning with themselves, they're cast down, but yet they're saying hope, telling themselves to hope and they're looking at this praise that is to come.

[4 : 42] That's the tension that exists in this psalm that we're going to walk through, this progression from pain to praise as it were, as the psalmist grapples with life in a fallen world.

And I think one way, we'll see the ways in which this psalm is so real. The psalmist, he's clearly downcast, he's overwhelmed with pain and sorrow. You can see that already just in a cursory reading, physically and mentally, spiritually.

He's been mocked and abused by others, his emotions are intermingle, he feels abandoned by God, everything feels so hard. He's like a deer panting for water, he's so spiritually dry.

And he's asking why? Why have you let me be in this position, God? This is a real psalm, this is a real person like us.

And I think in that way it's a really good psalm for us to look at, because for some of us this might be how we feel right now as we come to this psalm. For others first, we might be looking after people, or we might have friends and loved ones we can't be with who are feeling this and we're feeling this with them.

[5 : 56] And for others, well, this psalm is preparing us, it's giving us the words that we might need to use in the future. It's a psalm that equips us for walking in this world.

I mean how many people can, I'm sure many of us, can look at verse three, how many of us have wept so much or just felt so racked with pain that we don't feel like we can eat?

Or the question life has become so difficult that actually being with God's people feels like a distant memory. All these images that he uses are real. So can I encourage you, we're not going to be able to go through everything now, but come back to this psalm and let it be your words in the future.

This psalm is not a sudden cure for sorrow, it just puts things into words. And I think one simple reminder that we're going to look at going through the whole thing is the way the psalmist reminds himself in each of those choruses to look up when you're cast down.

That's what we see in each chorus. He speaks to himself, he reasons with himself to look up when he's cast down. And we're going to look at that under three headings because the psalmist reminds us of the character of God in each of these verses and it's the character of God that helps him to do that.

[7 : 14] And so three headings, the God who knows, the God hears and God leads as we look through each of those sections. So first of all, let's look at that first verse as it were, 42 verses 1 to 5, God knows.

I've already said verse three is so realistic, isn't it? My tears have been my food day and night. So many other tears of the psalmist that they have no appetite.

On top of that, they feel separated from God and his people. That language of thirsting and wanting God, maybe they were physically separated from God at this point.

It could have been, references later on in what is it, verse six of Mount Mizar and Mount Hermon, those are mountains in the north of Israel. The psalmist could have physically been separated from God and his people at this point.

Could be longing for the fellowship of his Christian friends. You could think a very similar thing, could well be written and sung by someone who's out on their five week stint on the rigs or is maybe in the army and they're months away from Christian family.

[8 : 27] Or maybe someone who just lives alone at home and for various reasons, maybe illness wise or something else, they are very isolated.

We can be very isolated even surrounded by other houses. It can lead us to feeling very spiritually lonely and dry like the psalmist. But grief is isolating too, isn't it?

Grief can become so consuming that it can be difficult to hold a conversation, difficult to relate to people even if they're right in front of us. It can form a bubble around you that actually that's the only thing you can really think about and you feel so.

Something else is just a haze beyond that barrier, whether it's grieving a loved one, whether it's anxiety about the future, all kinds of things.

You can struggle to pray, struggle to put in to any words other than help to God. That's the position of the psalmist. The psalmist feels dry, the psalmist feels distant, the psalmist feels attacked by people who are in the midst of all of this, putting down and saying, God, where's God in all of this?

[9 : 41] Almost like his life is a proof that God not existing. But the psalmist knows that God hasn't abandoned him.

Look at the words the psalmist uses. Look at the way in verse two, he says, my soul search for God for the living God. The psalmist knows who is out there.

He's not just calling into a he or she, he isn't just calling into a vacuum. There is a God that's out there, a living God, a God who is personable, a God who knows.

Just to illustrate the difference in a personal God, just think of it, a child often, you know, they gather loads of soft toys around them in bed. I don't know, my sisters had tons of these teddy bears and stuff like that.

There was barely room for them in their bed. The child loves cuddling with all these soft toys, but when they wake up in that night and when they're scared because of a dream, they generally don't want a soft toy, do they?

[10 : 38] They call out for their parents. They want a parent to come and comfort them, to hold them, to pat their back maybe as they go back to sleep. A real person who understands their distress, who they can talk to and articulate and who gives real tangible comfort.

You wouldn't want a parent who comes to them and the child starts screaming and the parent freaks out and starts screaming as well. In our moments of distress, we need a personable God, but we also need a God who's got weight, who isn't blown away by our own fears.

A God who is steadfast and who is immovable, who understands but who isn't rocked by our emotions like we are. You know, we're emotive people, but sometimes we can just stress each other out.

God's emotive, he understands, he can sympathize, but he isn't overwhelmed. Our problems don't bubble over and make God overwhelmed as well.

He's our creator, our sustainer. We think that some people, they struggle to understand us. God knit us together in his mother's rooms. When we feel like our minds are overwhelmed, well, God knows every single neuron that's firing at that moment.

[11 : 52] He understands and he's not rocked by the storm like we are. And so as the psalmist thirsts for God, he knows that it's only the living God who can provide any kind of tangible hope and tangible help amidst this suffering.

That's who the psalmist needed to be reminded of and that's who we need to be reminded of. That's the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Maybe I'm jumping there a bit quickly, but that's the God we meet in person.

It's so much better in so many ways to know, to see in the gospels the Christ who walked and talked and who acted like that. We see the God who is personable and who knows and who Christ could walk alongside the grieving and he could comfort them tangibly, really, with Mary and Martha, for example.

And Jesus understood like the psalmist. He understood the pain of this world. Just last week we talked and through some of the ways in which like a great high priest, he's experienced so much of the suffering, being rejected, being an outcast, being misunderstood.

He understood pain in the truest sense of the world, but he wasn't rocked by it, was he? He can understand, but he's steadfast.

[13 : 20] And so when we grieve, when we're holding on, when we're trying to walk through this world of suffering, the psalmist's reminder is that when we're cast down to look up, when we are looking inside ourselves, we're looking in our minds, we're saying, why am I in so much turmoil?

The psalmist says hope in God. Which God is that? First, we see that's the living God, the God who knows.

Hope in the living God, the Christ who knows us from the inside out, who knows us because he was a man, but he also is God.

And so he is steadfast, demovable and completely understanding. Now, at this point, you might be thinking, right, okay, it's all well and good to say hope in Christ who, you know, he understands physical pain and hope in God, the living God, but that doesn't make a difference.

I still feel in pain. I still feel gripped by anxiety. What difference does that make? And you know, actually, you're in good company because the psalmist says the same thing.

[14 : 32] He keeps going after verse five, doesn't he? He's just told himself, hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. What's the next thing he says?

My soul is cast down within me. He still, the psalmist is still struggling. He says, I'm still downcast. Maybe I shouldn't be, but I am.

It's real. So second point now, the God who hears, God hears our pain. And in some ways it looks like in verse six, the psalmist is trying to take his own advice.

You know, he's saying, my soul is cast down within me. What do I meant to do when I'm cast down? Therefore I remember you. Therefore I remember you from the land of the Jordan and Herman, from Mount Mizar.

You know, he's, those are the first points away from the temple, you might say. The psalmist is distant physically or in his mind as he could be from God's people.

[15 : 29] And yet he's saying, even when I feel distant from God, even when I feel as far away as possible, what do I have to do when I'm cast down? I have to look up. I have to cast my mind to God, even when I'm in turmoil.

I love the imagery of verse seven. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls or your breakers, then your waves have gone over me.

He feels like he's being tossed around by waves. Have you ever experienced that before? Like actually in the waves. Maybe you've been swimming in the sea or body boarding or surfing or whatever like that.

And a big wave catches you and knocks you under and you go maybe head over heels. The sand goes up your nose, bubbles everywhere. And as you frantically scramble and get up for another breath, just then another wave comes over and knocks you over again and you're tumbling under.

Wave after wave knocking you down unless, I don't know, you get to the shallows or someone pulls you out. That's what the psalmist feels like. That's what he's describing.

[16 : 32] That's how life sometimes feels. Something knocks us off balance. And then just when we feel like we're recovering, another wave comes and just knocks us down and pulls us under.

Maybe it's that you're recovering from an illness, maybe along COVID and then something else comes and hits. Maybe it's the death of a loved one. Maybe it's maybe some news about financial news that just completely puts the future into question.

Unknowns. Maybe a relationship breakdown within family is all kinds of things can just hit us out of nowhere like waves after wave. We think, okay, I'm just going to get to the end of this and then something else comes along.

We don't know what it was for the psalmist, but the waves kept coming. But notice what he does with the waves that knock him down. This is possibly my favorite thing in the whole psalm.

He names them. Look at that. He recognizes that this untamed chaos isn't outside God's control. He can't understand what's happening.

[17 : 45] He knows God isn't the author of evil, but he knows that God is sovereign. He says at the roar of your waterfalls, all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

His adversaries are taunting him and saying, where is your God? But he knows that the living God is in control. It might feel like, you know, this whole world's out to get him that where is God at this time?

But he knows that even when life is tough, even when the waves of this broken world are hitting him, he knows that God is still in control.

And it's because of that he can go on and pray in verse eight. He knows that there's a God who is in control and therefore a God who can do something and therefore a God that he is.

And so verse eight, he says, by day the Lord commands his steadfast love. At night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. He's saying that simultaneously to saying your waves are crashing over me.

[18 : 46] At the same time he's saying, you're steadfast in love. There's that tension there, isn't it? He's acknowledging the breakers crashing, but also the God who remains steadfast and removable that in this, this doesn't mean that God is loving.

God is still the steadfast God. With the God who's singing to him at night, who's protecting him. He's God is steadfast and immovable, unchanging in control.

And that's why he's also could be so honest with the way he prays. You know, 10 times in Psalm 42 and 43, I think I got the count right.

He asks the question, why? We're allowed to ask that question, why? You know, if you're listening online or maybe thinking about Christian things for the first time, you're allowed to ask why questions.

You're allowed to ask why is there suffering in the world? You're allowed to ask God, why did you let this love person die? Or why is this happening to me? God could take our why questions.

[19 : 52] The psalmist says it plenty of times here. I once was asked talking to a friend about this psalm and I asked him, asked him why it was so precious to him.

And he said the repetition of the question of why was something that helped me in my prolonged troubles. I related to the question in that form. When I had no obvious reason to hope, I hoped against all reason because I knew God is an unchanging God in that age and this so that if the psalmist could hope, then so could I.

If the psalmist could hope, then so could I. So can we. We have a God who knows. We have a God who hears a God who is suffering. And no cry is too small.

No person is too insignificant. That's why I wanted us to read that passage in Mark's Gospel. It's just a wonderful, we see Jesus walking on the scene and just displaying that.

Jesus is going to Jairus's house, Jairus, the big important synagogue ruler whose daughter is at the point of death. And what does Jesus do? He stops. He stops for the lady who's been bleeding for 12 years.

[20 : 58] The person who is an outcast, who is insignificant, who in every other time, every other person inside probably wouldn't have stopped for her. They would have got as far away from her as they could.

So they didn't get unclean. But Jesus stops for her. He makes time for her. Well, just think of when Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem and he's just predicted his death three times.

Now, if you knew you were going to die, I think you'd be focusing on that. But as Jesus is going towards Jerusalem, blind Bartimaeus calls out, son of David, have mercy on me and people are saying Bartimaeus, be quiet.

He doesn't want anything to do with you. What does Jesus do? He calls to him. He asks him to come. There's no one who is insignificant in the eyes of God.

There's none of our troubles that are insignificant to God. God doesn't come and say, pull up your socks. You were telling me about that last year. Is that still a pain?

[21 : 58] Can't he just get over then? We might find that. We might think that, maybe I've been going through this for months. I've been going through this for years.

This has been my prayer request every time I'm meeting with people. I don't want to tell them that again. There's no need, A, we shouldn't be embarrassed to give the same prayer request with Christians.

But we certainly don't need to with God. We can come with God year in, year out with the same worries and concerns and prayers. Whether it's praying for a dear loved one who doesn't know Christ, or for the pain that racks our own body or our hearts as we continue to wrestle with grief.

When we're down, we need to look up. We can look up to the God who hears, to the God who knows. He's steadfast in love.

Christ didn't ascend to heaven and then turn his back on us. There's a reason we're told that he stands at the right hand of God, interceding for us. He's still active in his ministry.

[23 : 07] Jesus is as active at the throne of God as he was when he paid attention to that woman and to blind Bartimaeus. He still cares about the little people and the little problems and the big problems.

So we've seen that God hears, God knows. Third, I want to move us into the third stanza of the Psalm, which we look at Psalm 43.1 to 5 now.

God leads. God leads. I don't know whether you've noticed, but in some ways the three parts of this Psalm almost move from past to present to future.

Having remembered the tears of yesterday in that first part to verse 5 and then is grappled with the present waves of life that are crashing over him. Now the psalmist longs for the end and looks for the end.

Vindicate me, my God. Defend my cause. He cries in verse 1. In other words, judge justly. Put things to right. This isn't how it should be. That's what we call out, isn't it?

[24 : 14] As we grieve amidst sorrow, we say, God, change this. Change this. Again, he reminds himself of who God is. You are my refuge.

You are my fortress. You're steadfast and movable. That same kind of concept comes back again and again. And he clings to the truth in verse 2.

He knows that God is his refuge, even if tangibly his experience. He feels like God is distant. You know, maybe it's the words that people are saying to him is taking a taking root. Maybe it's just that his circumstances haven't changed for so long.

He feels like, like God has rejected him. He remembers that God is his refuge. He remembers.

And almost is another wave is about to crash over him. He sends up a flare, doesn't he? A cry of distress in verse 3. Send out your light and your truth. Let them bring me.

[25 : 10] Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. He's crying out to God to help navigate him back on path on track. Everything feels black.

He's looking for that glimpse, that flicker of light in the darkness to help him just to just get back on track. And that flicker, that light at the end of the tunnel, he wants to get back to worshipping God.

We've seen that progression through the psalm. Verse 4. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy and I'll praise you with my liar. Oh God, my God.

So what's the path for him? What's the path from that pain to praise? We get a hint of that again in verse 3. He says, send out your light and your truth.

It's God's truth that is the light by which he navigates, by which he's able to see through the present circumstances that might cloud everything else out.

[26 : 11] And actually this whole psalm in some ways is just an expression of what that looks like in practice. What does it look like for God's truth to guide us from pain to praise? Well the psalmist is showing us in writing this psalm.

He's writing this psalm, he's grappling with the truths, he's wrestling with the pain and he's speaking those truths to himself. Those truths, he says that those truths that God is a refuge, God is my fortress, God is steadfast in love.

He's reminding himself, he sees maybe just those, a flicker of light over there in the blackness. But he's reminding himself, I have a steadfast God, I have a God who I will praise, who is worthy of praise.

And he's reminding himself of those things, even if they don't feel at the moment. And he's reminding himself that God will put things to right.

There is a hope. And in doing so I think he really models for us how to deal with suffering. He's not giving us a three-step plan, he's more just giving us a lifeline to hold on to.

[27 : 20] He's just reminding us basic truths in some ways to hold on to when we're cast down. When he's cast down he's saying these things I remember.

This is the God I remember. Say he's setting a pattern for us in some ways. When we're cast down to look up to the God who cares, who knows, who's a refuge.

And you know, lots of religions and human reason try to deal with the question of suffering, don't they? Whether it's a just accept it kind of attitude or determinism, look, just rise above it.

And almost the suffering is of this world, we need to just move above it all. And I think really the Gospel gives the only firm hope in this world of suffering, doesn't it?

The Psalm reminds us that grief is legitimate. Psalm doesn't deny sorrow. It acknowledges this world isn't how it should be, but the Gospel doesn't end with Jesus' suffering and death either, does it?

[28 : 28] It ends with, well it doesn't end. It keeps going with Jesus breaking the chords of death and ascending to heaven in triumph where he goes to prepare a place for us. The Psalmist here, he's looking forward to going back to the temple, to praising God.

That's the destination in view for him. We have even greater destination in view, don't we? He's looking forward when the pain will end and he'll be praising God at the temple.

We're looking forward to the home that Jesus prepares for us. The new creation where there will be no more pain. We can't go back to that enough. We have to remind ourselves what's there, what is that sliver of light that we keep going towards.

And Christ's death, Christ's resurrection, Christ's ascension means that that hope is firm. As Christians we both have a God that gives us hope amidst suffering and reminding us that it's okay to grieve, but he doesn't just leave us there.

He also gives us a firm hope that it's not the end. A solid hope, Jesus' resurrection, you might say, marks the path from here to the new creation.

[29 : 42] So when we cast down, let's look up. Let's look up to the God who cares, the God who hears, who knows, who leads.

In a moment we're going to come to God in prayer and commit all these things to him, but can I encourage you once again to come back to this psalm, to just store it away for the future, maybe even just that refrain, just reminding yourself that when you're cast down to hope in God, these truths aren't a quick fix.

The psalmist is still cast down by the end of the psalm. Do you see that? 43 verse 5, he's still cast down by the end, but he's reminded himself in that time of who his God is.

So store up these truths for the future. Let the psalmist's words become your own, either now or when they need to be. Maybe pass this psalm on to someone else, read it with someone else who's struggling.

May I encourage them. This is a psalm that really deals with pain, but it's also a psalm of hope. It's a psalm of praise within pain.

[30 : 58] The psalmist understands what's coming and the risen Jesus, as I said, he marks out the road from suffering to glory.

The gospel doesn't end in a grave, it ends in a garden. That was a great phrase I heard from someone. It ends in a garden, it ends in the new creation. That's our hope.

And even right now we don't see that, but Jesus still comes alongside us. He stoopes to gather us as we come from this procession, from this life to the next.

So may this psalm help us guard our hearts and point us to Christ at our time of need. Let's pray.