



Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016
Pastor Bill MacDonald
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Send Us Your Light: The Depressed

Psalm 42

We're in an advent series called *Send Us Your Light: Praying in the Darkness*, and we are looking at the ancient prayers of the saints found in the Psalms. Two weeks ago, Mark talked from Psalm 13 about those familiar feelings of interminable waiting for God to respond, the psalmist "howling" out the refrain, "How long O Lord." And as Mark pointed out in his new hit song "My Life Sucks," sometimes it seems like God doesn't care. Then last week we focused on Psalm 22, looking at the "prayer of the abandoned." So many verses in that psalm foreshadow the agony of our Lord on the cross, "My God my God why have you forsaken me." Why have you abandoned me?

The ancient writers spoke of something called "Deus Absconditus"—the God who is hidden. This year as we study prayer and grow in our practice of prayer, we will inevitably come to that time when we don't sense God's presence as we pray. It's as if God is hiding from us. Ever had that experience before? When you need a word of assurance or a demonstration of his presence and you get nothing? It feels like God isn't there... like he's abandoned you. We know it isn't true, but it feels like it sometimes, doesn't it?

St. John of the Cross wrote about this, and he called it the "dark night of the soul"—a sense of God's hiddenness in prayer. Richard Foster reminds us in his book on prayer that when those times happen, it's not because God is displeased with you, that you are insensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit, that you that you have committed some horrendous offense against heaven, or that there is something wrong with you, or anything. Foster says, "Darkness is a definite experience of prayer. It is to be expected, even embraced." [*Prayer, p. 19*]

Today we're looking at Psalm 42 and reflecting on the prayer of the depressed. Reflecting on the "darkness" that our spiritual forefathers experienced not only resonates with some of our own experience, but hopefully will help you experience more deeply Jesus' coming as the Light of the World!

Some of my comments may sound like things Pastor Mark has already touched on in this series. The psalms use many of the same methods again and again. Those of you who are teachers know that repetition and reinforcement train students in new habits you want them to learn.

I've spoken in the past of a summer mission trip I took to Mexico between my sophomore and junior years in college. Somewhere in the middle of my time in Mexico, I had a significant sense of loneliness and isolation. I contracted an ameba and couldn't eat the food. I was in a foreign culture with adults and children, trying to speak a language I barely comprehended, and trying to teach children in that same language I could barely speak myself. I was in a community with people from the states I didn't know, and I remember feeling alone and depressed. Strangely enough it produced in my spiritual life a deep hunger and longing in my soul for God. I was hungry for God like no other time I could remember in my spiritual pilgrimage up to that point in my journey. This is the place the writer of Psalm 42 finds himself. Let's listen:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
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 the 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 are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me; therefore I will remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon 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?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'*

*As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they
Say to me all the day long, 'Where is your "God?'"*

*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, my salvation and my God.*

Psalm 42 was written by “The Sons of Korah.” The sons of Korah were Levites; they were worship leaders—singers and musicians. Many scholars believe that the writer of Psalm 42 was a prisoner of war—possibly a captive of the Arameans in what is today modern Syria. The psalmist words reflect the suffering cries of a long held captive:

“My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God.’”

The psalmist is taunted by an enemy—probably his physical captors—who seeks to grind down his faith by ridiculing him about God’s absence.

The psalmist longs for return to worship his God with his fellow Israelites:

“When shall I come and appear before God?...

*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.”*

These are wistful memories of a worship leader who once led Israel in temple worship. Instead he finds himself isolated and in confinement. This produced a profound sense of grief and depression. You can sense the psalmist’s inner struggle to stay strong in faith:

*“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, my Savior and my God.”*

The psalmist asks many questions of himself and God. Six times he asks “why” questions. Two times He repeats the phrase: Why are you downcast o my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me? And he also asks God: Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

That’s a lot of ‘why’ questions in eleven verses! This guy’s in a world of hurt!

I don’t know about you but my experience asking God the “why” question when it pertains to suffering is usually met with silence. Heaven is often still when we ask questions like these:

- Why Lord did my spouse pass at such a young age from cancer?
- Why is my daughter’s husband leaving her?
- Why was my grandchild born with such an acute disability?
- Why did I lose my job?
- Why can’t we get pregnant?

I've found that these kinds of questions usually aren't answered to my satisfaction, and focusing on them leaves me wallowing in a pool of self-pity and frustration.

A better question I've found during times that don't make sense to me is the "what" or "how" question: "Lord, what is it you want to teach me through this experience? Lord, show me how I can make the most of this difficult time?"

You may not be a prisoner of war in a foreign land, but you may be acquainted with loss: loss of a loved one or the loss of Christian community at some point in your life, leaving you feeling alone, isolated and depressed. Then you throw December and Christmas into the mix and now your sense of loneliness is heightened, your depression increases because Christmas reminds everyone about family.

For four years I served at a church in North Carolina. Jennifer and I and the kids loved the community in Winston-Salem, but we really struggled at Christmas with no family close by. And many of you know what that feels like during the holidays when your family is not around. After several years we felt increasingly distant from family, and that increased our sense of isolation and loneliness.

How did the psalmist combat his own depression resulting from loss of his faith community? First, he talks to himself. He remembers God's faithfulness and he practices positive self-talk.

"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 are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.*

Do you hear what the psalmist does? First he remembers the "good times" in worship. He remembers leading the people into the temple; that comforts his soul. Then he drifts and his soul gets melancholy as he returns to the present "Why are you cast down, O my soul and why are you in turmoil within me" And then he catches himself and practices positive self-talk: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my Savior and my God."

Speaking positively to yourself is like injecting B vitamins into the bloodstream: immediate spiritual energy and vitality!

As I was walking out of the YMCA the other morning I noticed a quote on the chalkboard from Joyce Meyers, a well-known Christian teacher. It said: "It's hard to have a positive life if you're thinking negative thoughts." So true. That's why we have to train ourselves with positive self-talk. As one pastor put it, "We have to

practice the Principle of Replacement." We replace one set of thoughts with another.

British preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones used to say, "We must talk to ourselves, instead of allowing 'ourselves to talk' to us! We often increase our sense of anxiety and depression by listening to the sound of our own negative voice. We listen to our fears and worries and depression, rather than talking to ourselves and telling ourselves what is true. Reciting scripture is one way to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts. We need to be pro-active in removing negative thoughts and replacing them with positive thoughts.

We can hear the psalmist practicing positive self-talk when he is being seduced by feelings of depression.

"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. My salvation and my God."

Hear it? He engages his will. He takes action. He doesn't let his feeling rule him. This is more difficult for some of us who are "feelers" more than "thinkers." Some of us process information through our emotions before our intellect. If that's the case for you, you have to work hard at telling your feelings what to do, not let your feelings tell you what to think and how to act.

The second way the psalmist overcomes depression is he talks to God and practices gratitude. He looks for evidences of God's grace, however small.

*"By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
And at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life..."*

These "graces" sustain him during his long period of incarceration. The psalmist remembers the songs he used to sing during worship, and they bring him comfort and solace. This is a grace of God—a gift of consolation and relief from the loneliness of isolation. God didn't have to jog his memory with these songs, but they were gifts of grace that the psalmist needed to sustain his soul. "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love..." God assured the psalmist of his love.

Aren't you grateful for the countless manifestations of God's grace in your life? Do you know that everything good in your life is from Him? James says, "All good gifts are from above." He knows your every need and he provides for them. He knows when you're having a bad day, and could use a little cheering up. Maybe you receive a phone call from an old friend, or you get a note of encouragement in the mail. When that happens, you're left thinking, "Thank you God! You knew I needed that."

Sometimes a very small act of kindness in another person's life can make a big difference. I think this is why Jesus used the example of giving someone a "cup of

cold water." We think, "Oh, a cup of cold water... big deal." But if your mouth is parched and you're dehydrated, it's worth more than a million dollars at that moment.

This past couple weeks, you grabbed over 800 tags off Christmas trees for families in our communities. Someone said that the "teen" gifts were especially generous. These simple acts of generosity will make a difference to a lot of people this Christmas. Thank you; a gift of grace.

God's grace manifested in so many ways—large and small. A few years before coming to Chapel Hill, I was finishing up my work on my Doctorate of Ministry degree from Fuller Seminary. I had one class left, and I had no idea how we were going to pay for it. I needed to take a 12-unit class, and it was expensive. One day after worship, some friends in church came up and handed me a card. I thought to myself "that's sweet of Jim and Mary; they gave me an encouragement card." When I got home I opened the card and my little eyes became wide as saucers! Inside the card was a check for the exact amount of money I needed to cover the last class! I thought to myself, "Why did Jim and Mary give us this outrageous sum of money?" And that question was quickly followed by, "How did they know this was what I needed for the class? They didn't even know I was working on my Doctorate of Ministry! Tell me God doesn't know all our needs. Grace.

The older I get, the more I am in awe of God's infinite grace! One of my favorite hymns from the old Presbyterian Family Hymnal was *Wonderful the Matchless Grace of Jesus*. Whether the grace is large or small, it all originates from the same source—the loving hand of our Heavenly Father who knows what his children need when they need it. Gratitude is the appropriate response for all the evidences of His grace that we experience every day, and gratitude is one of our most powerful weapons we can practice to combat depression.

So how does the psalmist teach us to overcome depression?

- Talk to yourself: Remember God's faithfulness and practice positive self-talk.
- Talk to God: Be grateful for his graces in your life.