

The Psalmist Speaks in Despair: Psalm 42-43

Bruce Meyer

Desiring God as an antidote to sadness and opposition.

Introduction:

How a struggling saint finds hope in God.

Truth: Overwhelming sadness and opposition can become the catalysts that drive us back to the worship of God as the foundational solution to our emptiness and insecurity.

1. Preliminary Considerations

- a. *Maskil* (*maschil*, מַשְׁכִּיל), most likely means the psalm is a teaching psalm, deriving from the verb meaning “to have insight” or “to be skillful.” The LXX reads “for understanding” (εἰς σύνεσιν).
- b. Depression — Major Depressive Disorder is the term the *DSM V* uses to describe what has commonly been called clinical depression. The symptoms the *DSM* lists are what we would associate with hopelessness or despair and are consistent with a person who has lost faith or hope and has given up on life. In this condition, the person has likely moved into a position that is morally suspect.
- c. Sadness — I view sadness as a continuum, beginning with mild, moving to moderate and severe, potentially advancing to extreme despair or depression. The border of despair is not always easy to discern as we will see in our psalm. An additional problem is people often use “depression” in colloquial ways to express ordinary sadness (“I’m so depressed that my team lost in the playoffs” or “Rainy Mondays in winter are depressing”).
- d. Is the psalmist depressed or just sad?
 - i. “cast down” — נִשְׁחַל (šyḥ)
 1. Translations offer a variety of words for the psalmist’s emotional condition:
 - a. KJV, NKJV, ESV: “cast down”
 - b. HCSB, NET: “depressed”
 - c. NASB: “despair”
 - d. NIV: “downcast”
 - e. LES: “deeply grieved”
 - f. NLT: “discouraged”
 - g. CSB: “dejected”
 2. Senses:
 - a. “humbled” or “melt away” (qal stem) — [Psalm 44:25](#) “For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground.”

- b. “to despair” or “to sink down” (hitpolel stem) — [Psalm 42, 43](#) The word occurs only here in the OT (4x).
- c. The LXX uses the word περιλυπος, “very sad.” The word is used of Jesus’ sorrow in [Matthew 26:38](#) “Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me” and [Mark 14:34](#) “And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.”

ii. “turmoil” — *המח* (*hmh*) — to be distressed

e. Goldingay identifies the three strophes as: parched, overwhelmed, misjudged

1. Outcast — [Psalm 42:1-5](#)
2. Overwhelmed — [Psalm 42:6-11](#)
3. Opposed — [Psalm 43:1-5](#)

f. Elements of a lament:

- addresses God (the deliverer) and “Rock” (22x in the two psalms)
- complaint (the reason(s) for deliverance)
- request for deliverance
- vow of trust (hope of deliverance)
- vow of praise (expectation of deliverance)

g. What has prompted the psalmist’s sadness?

- i. Location — the land of Jordan, Mt. Hermon and Mizar
- ii. Situation: the psalmist is separated from God (the temple) and scoffers are taunting him.

2. Structure of the Psalms

- a. These two Psalms are divided into 3 strophes (stanzas), two in 42 and one in 43. The common refrains (42:5, 11 and 43:5) serve as boundary markers to the stanzas.
- b. Lament: [Psalm 42:1-4, 6-7, 9-10, 43:1-4](#)
- c. Hope: [Psalm 42:5, 8, 11; 43:5](#) “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.”

3. Exposition of the Psalms 42-43

- a. God teaches us how to express our sorrows to him (prayer).
 - i. Outcast (strophe 1): Longing for God because of isolation from God — [Psalm 42:1-2](#) “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?”

1. [Psalm 42:4](#) “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.”
 2. [Psalm 42:6](#) “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.”
 3. [Psalm 42:9](#) “I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?””
- ii. Overwhelmed (strophe 2): Overwhelming sorrow, tears
1. [Psalm 42:3](#) “My tears have been my food day and night
 2. [Psalm 42:7](#) “Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me” (cf. [Ps 88:7](#)).
 - a. With what is the psalmist overwhelmed? He’s not specific, but in context he is complaining about isolation, sadness, and oppression.
 - b. The ocean in the Scriptures is a place of out-of-control chaos and unpredictability. Jonah quotes this verse in [Jonah 2:3](#).
 - c. In this context, the psalmist has asked for water, he cries tears, but he is drowning in overwhelming waves of sorrow that feel like death.
- iii. Opposed (strophe 3): Opposition from scoffers — [Psalm 42:3](#) while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?””
1. “Where is your God?”

[Psalm 42:9–10](#) 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?”

[Psalm 43:1–4](#) “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an 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 God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.”
- iv. Application
1. We can be open and vulnerable with his feelings and thoughts before God. (“pour out”)
 2. We can enumerate the possible threats we are facing.
 3. We can be open with our discomfort over the Lord’s seeming distance.
 4. We should be aware that external circumstances can have a direct influence on my internal spiritual state, including my view of God.
 5. In bringing these sorrows to God, we are expecting him to do act in our behalf (trust)
- Either change my circumstances, or,
Change me

6. God teaches us how to find hope in him (truth).

i. God is the source of all hope because he is my salvation

[Psalm 42:5, 11, 43:5](#) “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”

Expressing praise is a means of demonstrating expectant faith.

ii. God is the source of all love because he is the living God (v. 2) who gave me life.

[Psalm 42:8](#) “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.”

iii. God is the source of all strength because he never changes.

[Psalm 42:9a](#) “I say to God, my rock . . .”

iv. God is the source of all grace because he is all truth.

[Psalm 43:3](#) “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling!”

It’s like light and truth take me by the hand and lead me through this darkness. This truth should be comforting to us.

v. Application

1. We must persist in preaching truth to ourselves.

Note: This is not the power of positive thinking. That’s rubbish. This is knowing and accepting God’s truth over the lies circulating around me.

2. Deliverance has not yet come, but we can remain confident in God’s imminent provision.

The psalmist is struggling with both the intensity of his suffering and the power of God’s steadfast love (v. 8). God’s qualities, however, do not automatically negate the sadness. Both our sadness and God’s love often coexist, but the psalmist isn’t lost in the despair of his doubts or sorrows because his focus is on the immutable character of God.

3. We might question the validity of my feelings. Am I really seeing my circumstances accurately considering who God is? “Why are you . . .”

4. It’s possible for us to feel lousy and yet not know why.

5. It’s possible to feel lousy and yet both think and know the truth.

6. I must remind myself of the good theology I know to be true (“steadfast love” and “a prayer to the God of my life”) that contradict what I’m feeling.

I must remind myself that God is his hope of salvation.

He remembers worship in the temple ([Ps 42:4](#))

He remembers God from a distant location ([Ps 42:6](#))

He asks God why he has forgotten him ([Ps 42:9](#)). To “forget” is to ignore, a deliberate exclusion from one’s thoughts. His statement of faith tells us he knows God hasn’t abandoned him but his feelings are not yet convinced.

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Explanation: To the Jew, the temple represented worshiping with other believers in the very presence of God, the Holy of Holies. For us, we recognize that we can worship God anywhere and anytime ([Jn. 4:24](#)), but we also look forward to that time when we will be in the very presence of God, worshiping as one great body, seeing God face to face. This worship is made possible only through the finished work of Christ ([2 Cor. 5:8-9](#)).

Psalms, Volume 1 Contemporary Significance

One of the roles of the worshiping congregation is to worship when I cannot, to celebrate the resurrection of Christ when I am mourning the death of a loved one or struggling with my own sin. The congregation is to declare the wonderful works of God even when I can no longer see him or sense his presence.

Wilson, Gerald H. Psalms. Vol. 1. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

Conclusion: In yearning for God with such urgency and passion, I realize that there is someone much larger than my narrow perspective on life. I come to realize that God’s infinite nature easily eclipses the finite struggles I’m encountering, even if they are large. It is my faith, weak and frail as it may be, that clings to the truths of God’s nature and work— that clings to God himself!

Genuine worship acknowledges God’s infinite and transcendent nature and work. When our suffering dominates our personal landscape, we need someone who is larger than the landscape, larger than our view of the landscape.

Truth: Overwhelming sadness and opposition can become the catalysts that drive us back to the worship of God as the foundational solution to our emptiness and insecurity.