God’s Cure for Depression

It is likely that Psalm 42 and 43 were originally combined as one psalm. Two reasons can be given: First, they both share a common theme and the same expressions are found in both psalms (42:5, 11; 43:5). Second, only Psalm 42 has a superscription. Psalm 43 has none, and it is the only psalm in the second book (Psalm 42-72) without a superscription. Both of these psalms speak of depression and its cure. As in other psalms, the writer reveals the inner turmoil of his heart and also testifies of his faith in God.

The subtitle of Psalm 42 says “to the chief musician” or music director. It is identified as a “maschil,” a Hebrew term meaning this was for instruction and wisdom. The context of these two psalms is inner despair and depression. Psalm 42 is the first of eleven psalms attributed to “the sons of Korah.” In both psalms the writer describes his internal pain, and then moves toward personal prayer and praise for God’s help.

1. The psalmist’s desire (42:1-2)
The writer is facing a spiritual drought (vs. 1-2) and he pants for the Lord as a deer pants for water. His soul is thirsty for God. Psalms 119:131 I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments. This image of God providing living water (satisfaction) for the soul is found in many scriptures: Psalms 36:8-9 They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures. For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light. Jeremiah 2:13 For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. Jeremiah 17:13 O LORD, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters. John 4:10 Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. John 7:37-38 In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. Revelation 7:17 For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Revelation 21:6 And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. Revelation 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

2. The psalmist’s discouragement (42:3)
The writer describes his constant tears resulting from the taunts of his enemies. He is a Levite who finds himself in Gentile territory. He must not have been ashamed to stand for the Lord because his enemies knew of his faith in Jehovah. His enemies wanted him to believe that God had forsaken him. They asked, “Where is your God?”

3. The psalmist’s desperation (42:4)
This brought to mind sweet memories of trips made to worship God on special occasions. The Jews were required to make three trips to Jerusalem each year for the feasts (festivals) of Passover, Firstfruits, and Tabernacles (Booths). On these trips the people would sing
Psalms 120-134, known as “Songs of Ascent.” The psalmist poured out his heart to God, as others have done in time of need. 1 Samuel 1:15 And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. Psalms 62:8 Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah. Lamentations 2:19 Arise, cry out in the night: in the beginning of the watches pour out thine heart like water before the face of the Lord: lift up thy hands toward him for the life of thy young children, that faint for hunger in the top of every street. 1 Peter 5:7 Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

4. The psalmist’s depression (42:5-11)
In verse 5, the writer asks himself a question: “Why are you cast down (lit., bowed down)?” He rebukes himself for having this pity party, because he realizes he has help in the Lord. His situation is not hopeless; therefore he must not feel hopeless. Feelings of despair may overcome anyone. At times Jesus was troubled and distressed. John 11:33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. John 12:27 Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. John 13:21 When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

In verse 6, the writer confesses his depression to God and then expresses his confidence in God. Talking to himself, he says “I will remember…” Sometimes the best therapy is to remember days when God was very real and near. The land of the Jordan and the heights of Hermon (vs. 6) refer to the headwaters of the Jordan River that flow toward the south. The phrase “Deep calls unto deep” (vs. 7), refers to sounds and scenes from Mt. Hermon and Mt. Mizar where snow would melt into waterfalls. It was as if God was talking to nature and nature was talking back. But the writer thinks of his own troubles described as cascading waterfalls that are almost drowning him. He is confident that the Lord will provide loving-kindness and encouragement (His song in the night). His faith is expressed in 42:8, “Through each day the Lord pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to God who gives me life” (New Living Translation).

Again in verses 9-10, the writer pours out his heart to the Lord. He asks why God has forgotten him. He misses the assurance of God’s presence. God would never forsake any of His children, but there are times when it seems like He has. He tells the Lord about the taunts and mocking of his enemies. They challenged him about his relationship with the Lord again (“Where is your God?” see vs. 3).

5. The psalmist’s deliverance (43:1-2)
In 43:1-2, the writer describes more of his people problems. He feels like others have done him wrong and he feels like God has forsaken him. He has been falsely accused and unfairly treated. He is weak and wonders why God has abandoned him (“cast me off”). He describes both his rejection and his depression. He asks for deliverance (vs. 1), and he wants God to be both his judge and his defense attorney.

6. The psalmist’s direction (43:3-4)
He asks for guidance. He knows that God’s light (guidance) and truth (instruction) will bring him to the place of safety and satisfaction (“your holy hill…your tabernacle”). Whenever we are hurting and depressed we need to worship. We need to meet with God
(our exceeding joy) at His altar (vs. 4). The altar is the place where God meets us. We may approach God and fellowship with Him only through blood sacrifice.

7. The psalmist’s devotion (43:5)
These two psalms not only describe a depressed man, but they reveal a devoted man, one who knows God and depends on Him. In these psalms we find seven references to God:

- The living God (42:2)
- Thy God (42:3, 10)
- My God (42:6, 11; 43:4, 5)
- The God of my life (42:8)
- God my rock (42:9)
- The God of my strength (43:2)
- God my exceeding joy (43:4)

These psalms describe “the uplook of a downcast soul.” As we have seen, David often hoped in God in the midst of depressing circumstances (see 1 Sam. 30:1-6). When he had cried his last tear and the people turned against him, he was encouraged in God. 1 Samuel 30:6 And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God. In dark and difficult times we can be sure that God’s character remains the same. Oswald Chambers said, “It is not our trust that keeps us, but the God in whom we trust who keeps us.”

Billy Graham relates the story of the great reformer Martin Luther who went through a period of depression and discouragement: “One day his wife came to the breakfast table all dressed in black, as if she were going to a funeral service. When Martin asked her who had died, she replied, ‘Martin, the way you’ve been behaving lately, I thought God had died, so I came prepared to attend His funeral’” (Unto the Hills, 234).
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