

2. Gasping for life

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- [0 : 0 0] Well friends, turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 42 on page 469 in the Church Bibles. The next two weeks we'll be looking at a few more of these Psalms written by the Sons of Korah, a group of temple musicians.
- Next week, Psalm 45, a song of love. And this week, Psalm 42, a cry of pain. And perhaps if Andy Murray were playing slightly better, I preached him the other way around, but here we are, Psalm 42.
- To the choir master, a maskill of the Sons of Korah. 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 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.
- [1 : 1 8] 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 remember you.
- From the land of Jordan and of Hermon. From Mad Mitzah. 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 within 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.
- [2 : 2 3] While they say to me all 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. 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 him with the lyre.
- [3 : 2 1] O God, my 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. Perhaps you would turn with me back to Psalm 42.

Page 469. In the church Bibles. And while you find it, we'll have a moment's prayer. Lord God, we turn to your word now as needy and dependent upon your help.

And yet we trust that your word is powerful. And that your spirit is more than able to overcome our cold hearts and tired minds.

And imperfect preachers. So help us, Lord, and lead us to Christ our King. In his name we pray. Amen. While in front of us we have just two Psalms.

[4 : 33] Containing the last surviving shreds of a man's life. All that we know about him. His life is on these two pages.

A few little fragments of evidence. From a long dead man. Whose life was in tatters. You almost feel as if you need to handle them with forensic gloves.

We don't know his name. We don't know precisely when he lived. Just that he was an anonymous temple musician. From Jerusalem.

And beyond that. The only thing that's certain about him. Is that as he poured out his heart onto these pages.

He was in a very bad way. So our first job tonight. Before we can really begin to ask how we fit into these songs.

[5 : 34] Is to try and piece together the picture. These Psalms are full of little scraps of information. As to what's gone on. But they're equally full of mystery.

And so before we can get some answers. We've got a bit of digging to do. Now you've all read. The detective stories. Which begin.

With a rather slow. Dimwitted police inspector. There's always one of them isn't there. Who's convinced. That they're dealing with a simple case. Of suicide.

Straight forward. Until Poirot. Or Sherlock. Or whoever it is. Shows up. On the scene. Asking all his annoying questions. And suddenly it isn't so simple.

Well we need to avoid making the same mistake. With Psalm 42. Because most of us are fairly familiar with it. Aren't we? At least from the rather sugary songs.

[6 : 33] We sing based on this Psalm. But if verse 1. Conjures up a gentle image. Of a white-tailed deer. Drinking from a tranquil stream.

Then it might just be. That the songs we sing. Have prejudiced the case. You see this is not. About a happy young Christian.

Who's just eager. For a closer experience of God. It's a man. Who is gasping. Gasping for life. He feels cut off.

And abandoned by his God. He's isolated. And confused. And he's desperate. And just as a deer. Gasping for water.

Is fighting for its life. So a man. Cut off from God. Is facing. A sort of living death. So what's going on.

[7 : 34] What is this man's problem. Well the Psalm is just. Full of questions. Nothing here is simple. So before we rush. Into our main points. And I promise. Two of them will come eventually.

Let's be good detectives. And consider what we need to ask. Just look at all the intriguing questions. The Psalm raises. For a start. There's the question.

Of whether we're even dealing. With one Psalm here. Or two. Our Bibles give them separate numbers. But the closer you look. The more obvious it becomes.

That they're joined together. The chorus. Comes twice in Psalm 42. And also ends Psalm 43. The problems are the same.

Why do I go about mourning. Because of the oppression of the enemy. Verse 9. And verse 2. The meter. Of the poetry. In the Hebrew. Is the same.

[8 : 33] Psalm 43. Has no title of its own. They seem to share. And finally. Many of the Hebrew manuscripts. Simply bundle the two of them together. One Psalm or two.

And then come all the questions. Of the Psalmist himself. Have you noticed those? Verse 2. When. Shall I appear before God.

Or see his face. Verse 3. The question. Which his enemies. Taunt him with. And which he's bound. To be asking himself. Where is this God of yours?

Verse 5. Why. Are you cast down. O my soul. What's wrong with me? Verse 6. Why Lord. Have you forgotten me? Why must I mourn?

And be taunted by these enemies? 43. Verse 2. Most painful of all. Why. Have you rejected me God? This man is facing.

[9 : 36] A bewildering set of questions. And clearly. He doesn't have. All the answers. And then finally. There are all the questions. Which we readers.

Must be asking ourselves. Who is this man? What on earth has happened to him? What's the cause of it all? Is this clinical depression?

Is he just down in the dumps? Is it some problem in his circumstances? Or is there something else going on? Some sort of sin behind this?

Or sickness? Or spiritual problem? And people seem very keen to pigeonhole this man's problems as one or the other of those things.

So preachers who've read Martin Lloyd-Jones' classic book want to reproduce it by preaching a sermon all about spiritual depression. And others want to say that this is nothing unusual at all.

[10 : 35] Just a blue feeling that all of us get from time to time. And then others still say that what this man needs is not a well-meaning pastor. But a well-qualified doctor.

And often there's a lot of truth in that. But I think as we begin to piece together the evidence, then the situation of the man in the psalm gets more and more complex.

And as keen as we might be to label his problems as physical or spiritual or emotional, it seems to me that all of those things are involved. And I think that is just true to what the Bible says about human beings.

We don't have a separate physical bit and spiritual bit. We just aren't created like that. In fact, that separation of physical and spiritual is how the Bible sees death.

Something very unnatural. So it makes sense then if, just like the man in the psalm, a problem with our circumstances can also affect our spiritual and emotional health.

[11 : 49] If it didn't, we wouldn't be properly human. And so a key lesson as we begin looking at this psalm is that sometimes our Christian life can get very difficult, very dark, for all sorts of different and complex reasons.

So then let's try to get some answers. What can we gather about this man as we do our detective work? Well, the immediate problem, his immediate problem is a physical one.

He's been through a complete upheaval in his circumstances. Everything he knows has been turned on its head. We know from the title that the writer is a son of Korah, a temple musician.

So his life's work and ministry has been to lead God's people in worship. And in verse four, he can hardly help himself from thinking back to the good times.

The days when the physical signs of God's presence filled his life. The festivals and processions.

- [13 : 03] The glad shouts and songs of praise. The days when church was packed and when his heart felt warm. And when fellowship with God's people came easily.
- The days of our conversion as a young student. The days of our life. The days of our life. Or our early exciting Christian life. In the Glasgow tent hall.
- But now. All of that is gone. Now he is gasping for God's presence. He belongs in Jerusalem. In the temple.
- But at the end of us six. We get a glimpse of the physical problem. He's miles from home. I remember you from the land of Jordan. And of Hermon.
- From Mount Miser. He's stranded miles from nowhere. In the hills of northern Palestine. Samaria. And he's desperately homesick.
- [14 : 06] Gone is the temple. Gone is his vocation. And his identity. Gone are the glad shouts. And the songs of praise.
- Gone are the festivals. And processions. Gone is the music. And the preaching. And the fellowship. And gone is every.
- Tangible feeling. Of God's presence. And there's more going on. We have no idea why. He's stranded here.
- But it seems like there are vicious enemies. Behind it. Two times. He mentions their taunting. Verse three. And verse ten. Where's this God of yours now then?
- Two times. Verse nine. And forty three. Verse two. He tells us that their oppression. Has driven him. Into a state of mourning. And some forty three.
- [15 : 03] Begins with a plea. For God to judge. And deliver him. From their deceit. And injustice. Jesus. Well we can only speculate.
- As to what's happened to him. One way or another. He's been exiled. And run out of Jerusalem. Perhaps because. He didn't keep in.
- With the establishment figures. The politicians. And the religious elite. Or perhaps he fell prey. To some sort of military skirmish.
- Maybe one of the hostages. Dragged away to Samaria. By a northern king. Like Jehoash. We're left to guess. But we can get. A pretty good picture.
- Of what it felt like. He's left. Cut off. From the temple. Surrounded by enemies. Of the gospel. And feeling isolated.
- [16 : 01] And abandoned. By God. And so of course. That physical problem. In his circumstances. Has spilt over. Into an emotional one. The chorus comes.
- Again and again. Three times. Why. Are you cast down. Oh my soul. And why. Are you in turmoil. Within me. Any of you.
- Who've suffered. From depression. Will understand. That question. He just can't. Explain. Why. He feels so empty. A numb.
- Confusing. Blackness. Creeps over you. A feeling. Which somehow. Your physical. Problems alone. Can't make sense of. Now.
- Some want to write this off. As just feeling. Down in the dumps. Something fairly normal. But that seems. Deeply unconvincing to me. If you open up.
- [16 : 57] Your Greek. Translations. Of the Old Testament. The Septuagint. You'll find. The Lord Jesus himself. Crying out in the garden. With just the same word. My soul is.
- Overwhelmed. Cast down. To the point of death. Down in the dumps. Hardly does that justice. Why are you cast down.

And why. Are you in turmoil. Within me. Maybe. Perhaps you've known. That sort of depression. In yourself. Or in a close friend. Where your emotions.

Burst out. Without warning. Or explanation. Sometimes in anger. Sometimes in grief. They just burst out. That's a soul.

In turmoil. The word used. To describe. The growling. And howling. Of a dog. A soul. Which you just. Can't quieten down.

[17 : 55] So it's physical. It's emotional. And finally. It's spiritual. Notice. That it's his soul. Which thirsts. For God's presence.

For that relationship. With God. Which he once knew. So closely. Now that doesn't mean. The little compartment. Of your mind. Which does God.

A soul. In the Old Testament. Is your whole being. Your whole person. A soul. Is what it is. To be alive. And for this man.

His soul. Is being starved. To death. It's powerful poetry. Isn't it? As a deer. Pants for water. So longs my soul.

For you. Oh God. It gasps. For fresh. Water. But instead. What does he get? Nothing. But. A diet. Of tears. To sustain itself.

[18 : 51] My tears. Have been my food. Day. And night. Well. We've pieced together. Enough. Of the picture. To make a start. So much. For the sickly sweet songs.

We tend to sing. Based on this psalm. But what are we. To make of it? Here's the cry. Of a man. In physical. And emotional. And spiritual turmoil.

But you might well ask. How's it supposed to help. You. After all. We live. In a very different age. And on the surface. The problems we face.

Won't look very like his. For a start. There is no physical temple today. Nobody can bar us. From direct access to God.

If this building. Were knocked down overnight. And the fire fell in. And the 500 of us. Met next week. Outside on the street.

[19 : 51] We would be every bit. As close to the Lord. And yet. I think this man's. Cry of grief. Is still very helpful.

Because. Although our circumstances. Will look rather different. The effect. Of feeling. Distanced from the Lord.

Can be just as bitter. And the likelihood. Is that most of us. Will experience that. At one time. Or another. Sometimes the distance.

In the relationship. Is emotional. Or psychological. We just don't feel. The way we once felt. We grow anxious.

Or cold. And our emotions. Just seem pale. And washed out. But even today. We can be distanced. As well. By physical circumstances.

[20 : 50] In fact. There will come a day. When each one of us. Will face them. Remember. That the temple. The place. Where God dwells today.

Is his people. God's temple. Through his spirit. Is his people. And so. Our experience. Of the Lord.

Is closest. When we meet together. Around God's words. When Paul tells the Corinthians. That they are God's temple. He's talking to them. Collectively.

As a church. Church. Now that might seem hard. To believe right now. When. You're dozing off in the pew. And desperately hoping. Nobody will notice. But I think it becomes.

Very easy to believe. The day. You're kept. From meeting with God's people. To be torn away. From church fellowship. For whatever reason. Frailty.

[21 : 46] Or ill health. Can leave us feeling. Isolated. And alone. And let me take the chance. To warn you now. That. One of the most.

Dangerous times. In our lives. Is not. When we're removed. From church. As a mature. Elderly believer. But when we're distanced. From it.

As a young man. Or woman. How many students. Have graduated. And moved away. From an exciting. Bible teaching church.

And found themselves. Looking back. Rather like. Verse four. On the days of. Christian union. And released the word. And wondered.

Where it's all gone. However remote. This psalm feels. There will probably. Come a day like this. For most of us. When fellowship.

[22 : 40] And warmth. And the Bible teaching. We've enjoyed. Just dries up. And what then? Well.

While you've still got. A little bit of mental fight. Left in you. Let me briefly. Make two points. Of observation. Firstly. God. Is the ultimate problem.

Sure. The obvious problem. Is the psalmist's. Physical situation. And behind that. His enemies. These taunting opponents. But behind the enemies. There's a bigger problem.

One that disturbs him. Far more. And that is his knowledge. Of God's. Complete sovereignty. Just look at what.

He's actually complaining about. It's amazing. How often this is missed. He's not really. Complaining about the enemies. Or his situation. Although he's got every reason to.

[23 : 40] He's complaining. That God. Doesn't seem to be doing anything. About it. When. Shall I finally appear. Before you Lord. Verse two.

Why. Have you forgotten me. Verse nine. Well still. Look at verse seven. All their breakers. And their waves. The waves of these enemies.

Have gone over me. No that is not. What he says. Is it? This man. Knows precisely. Who's in control. Deep. Calls to deep.

At the roar. Of your. Waterfalls. All your breakers. And your waves. Have swept over me. His enemies. Are real.

All right. And his physical. Problems are real. But this man. Is in no doubt. That behind them all. Lies the sovereign will. Of God. And for a believer.

[24 : 36] Like many of us. Who has met the Lord. And known his goodness. That can be a really. Worrying problem. You can imagine.

Can't you. How his enemies. Taunts. Had gnawed away. Even further. At his own doubts. 43 verse 2. You are the God.

In whom I take refuge. Why. Have you rejected me. Now we aren't told. Why the Lord. Is letting this happen. Like the psalmist.

We're left. In agonizing confusion. Confusion. And perhaps it is. That he's under the Lord's. Discipline. In some way. We simply aren't told. It has to be said.

That one of the least. Helpful things. You can say to somebody. Suffering from depression. Is that it's a result. Of their own sinfulness. I think. That is very rarely.

[25 : 33] Ever the case. But even so. We mustn't miss the fact. That the psalmist. Is absolutely comfortable. To put the blame.

Right at the Lord's feet. And it might just be. That you find it reassuring. That a man like this. A Bible writer. Has a robust enough faith.

To know where to direct. His complaints. God is. The ultimate problem. And although that is. Deeply unsettling. It's also.

His only grounds. For hope. Because secondly. God. Is the ultimate cure. If we know. Where to put the blame.

We also know. Exactly where to turn. For a way out. Just notice. The remarkable fact. That unsettled.

[26 : 32] Though he is. By what God has allowed. To happen. The psalm. Is absolutely. Shot through. With what he knows. About God's. Good character.

And God's attributes. And God's saving work. Look at the names. He uses. To describe the Lord. Look at the names. When his soul.

The essence. The essence. Of his life. Seems to be. Ebbing away. It's the living God. He thirsts for. In verse two. However cold.

And remote. His heart feels now. He has known. The Lord enough. In the past. To know. That he's a living God. One from whom. Life flows.

It's just the same. In verse eight. He's the God. Of my life. It's a sure sign. Isn't it? That his relationship. Has been real. Then comes the chorus.

[27 : 28] Verse five. Eleven. And forty three. Verse five. Hope in God. For I shall again. Praise him. And what does he call him? My salvation.

And my God. However he feels now. His hope. Is grounded. In what he objectively. Knows God to be.

What history. Has shown him to be. A saving. God. But not just a God. Who saves. Remote figures. From the past.

Again. It's personal. My. Salvation. Look at the footnote. In your Bible. And you'll see how the Hebrew. Emphasizes that. The salvation.

Of my face. And on it goes. Verse nine. He's my rock. A secure. Stable shelter. Forty three. Verse two.

[28 : 24] He's the God. In whom I take refuge. And verse four. Most extraordinary. Of all. As he looks forward. To one day. Returning to Jerusalem.

He is God. My exceeding joy. All this. From a man. In the throes. Of depression. So what is it then.

That lets him talk like this. Surely. It's because. He knows the Lord. Well enough. Even when he's down. To trust.

His good. And loving character. He doesn't look. In. To his own gloomy. Heart. For hope. Does he? All of our hearts.

Blow hot and cold. Isn't that true? So instead. He looks up. To the certain. And unchanging. Character.

[29 : 19] Of God. And just once. In verse eight. He evokes. God's personal. Covenant name. The name. Of a faithful. Promise keeping God.

Yahweh. The Lord. Capital letters. We were told earlier. That day. And night. He'd lived on a diet. Of tears. But now. Verse eight.

Day and night. He is reassured. By God's faithful. Unchanging love. By day. The Lord. Yahweh. Commands.

His steadfast love. And at night. His song is within me. A prayer. To the God. Of my life. He knows. What God is like. Because he can look.

Objectively. To what God. Has done. In the past. And to what he. Has personally. Experienced. Of God's goodness. And so he knows. That he's a God.

[30 : 14] He can turn to. Even now. Now let me just stop. And point out. That although it sounds. Deeply unsettling.

To see God. As the ultimate problem. It has actually been. The one reassuring. Constant. In this man's life. Because not only.

Has it shown him. Who to turn to. For help. It's also reminded him. When not. To dwell. Just look once more. At that great refrain.

Verse five. Perhaps. And notice what. The psalmist. Is questioning. He can't. Explain. His feelings. He can't fix.

His depression. But he does. At least know enough. To challenge it. Why. Are you cast down. Oh my soul. And why.

[31 : 10] Are you in turmoil. Within me. You see. He at least. Recognizes. That his own. Emotional. And psychological. Responses. Can't be fully.

Trusted. And so. He doesn't. Allow himself. To be taken over. By them. Instead. He forcibly. Directs his attention. To the one. Who can be trusted.

And counted on. Hope. In God. For I shall. Again. Praise him. My salvation. And my God. God. Sometimes.

It can be rather. Reassuring. To recognize. That we are not. In control. Of our emotions. Or our environment. And yet. That recognition.

Doesn't come easily. We have to determine. To take ourselves. In hand. And remember. What we know. To be true. About the Lord. Just look.

[32 : 07] How oddly. It comes. In the psalmist experience. Look at verse 6. I think this is possibly. One of the strangest. Therefore. I've come across. My soul is cast down.

Therefore. I remember you. From over here. In the land of Jordan. Is that how you work. When you're down. My tendency.

Is to remember myself. And focus inwards. I remember. I remember. What I'm missing out on. And who's to blame. And everything. That could have been done. Better. And again.

And again. I remember. How I'm feeling. It seems to me. Like. So much. Of modern. Counseling. Encourages that. Dwelling.

On our own feelings. On the validation. Of my emotions. But the psalmist. Looks upwards. And outwards. Look at all the yours.

[33 : 07] In the psalm. It's not only. Your breakers. And your waves. Behind his problems. But. 43 verse 3. It's your light.

And your truth. Which will lead him. Back to the Lord. He looks outwards. I think Lloyd-Jones. Is tremendously helpful here.

Let me read you. Just a little excerpt. The essence of the matter. Is to understand. That this self of ours. This other man. Within us.

Has got to be handled. Do not listen to him. Turn on him. Speak to him. Condemn him. Encourage him. Remind him.

Of what you know. Instead of listening. Placidly to him. And allowing him. To drag you down. And depress you. For that is what he will always do.

[34 : 03] If you allow him to be in control. The devil takes hold of self. And uses it. In order to depress us. We must stand up.

As this man did. And say. Why are you cast down? Stop being so. Hope in God. For I shall yet praise him.

God. So here's a picture of a man. Feeling. Cut off from God. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually.

He's at the end of his resources. A soul gasping for water. And yet. He hopes. However bleak.

His situation looked. However hopeless. He might have felt. There's signs of life. In him yet. Have you noticed them? The very fact.

[34 : 57] He's so distraught. Is one of them. If you're bothered. By the fact. That gospel joy. Doesn't come easily. Then that seems to me. A pretty sure sign.

That your relationship. With God. Has been real. The genuine article. Not only that. But this man. Clearly knows God. He knows what he's like.

And he knows. He's a God. He can turn to. And he knows. That his own self. Can't be left. To its own devices. He takes himself. In hand.

The problem. Is that when you're. In the throes. Of despair. When all is black. You often. Can't see. Those signs of life. In yourself.

So it's a great help. To see them here. In someone else. Someone who's been there. Long before. And it's a great help.

[35 : 52] I think at least. To know that. Finding the Christian life. Difficult. And barren. Does not make you. Unusual. There's nothing.

The psalmist felt. That even the Lord himself. Didn't experience. Remember the garden. My soul is.

Overwhelmed. To the point of death. Or the cross. My God. My God. Why have you. Forsaken me. And Jesus doesn't.

Simply understand. He promises. A way out. I wonder if it strikes you. That he uses this. Very imagery. Of thirst. And drought.

When he met a woman. Drawing water. From a well. A well. In Samaria. A woman. Barred. From the temple. And God's presence. Not just by distance.

[36 : 50] But by race. And gender. And a sinful past. A deadly cocktail. Of seed. Sex. And sin. She was in.

Every bit. As desperate. A situation. As our psalmist. And yet. The Lord offered her. Living water. Like us.

She wouldn't need. To meet God. In a building. Instead. God met her. In the person. Of his son. And offered hope. And now.

However far away. She had been. The way was open. To worship the father. Spirit. And in truth. Yes.

Like the psalmist. We can feel. Cold hearted. And isolated. Our soul. Can gasp. As we're separated.

[37 : 47] From the fellowship. We once loved. And the feeling. Of God's presence. But however. Dark it seems. However cold. Our hearts feel. However depressing.

Our sin. The objective. Truth. Is that if you're a believer. The Lord Jesus. Has poured. The living. Water.

Of his spirit. Into our souls. And we cannot. We will not be. Cut off. From him. And so we can sing.

With the psalmist. With. Even greater confidence. Hope. In God. For I shall again. Praise him. My salvation.

And my. God. Let's pray. By day. The Lord.

[38 : 44] Commands. His steadfast love. And at night. His song is with me. A prayer. To the God. Of my life. Father.

We have. So much. For which. To rejoice. Your steadfast. Faithful love. Your sovereign. Fatherly care. And the gracious.

Life. Of your spirit. Poured out for us. Through the work. Of your son. And yet often. For so many reasons. We feel ourselves.

Cast down. And away from you. Draw near to us. Father. And fix our eyes. On your good character. Send out.

Your light. And your truth. And let them. Lead us. To your side. For the sake. Of your son. We ask it. Amen. That's the way.

[39 : 40] You have to. That was so stable. That was some scholars.

At that time. There's a lot of speech.