

God, Our Only Hope

Psalm 42-43

Introduction

Two things that are abundantly evident in the Psalms are that humans are by nature emotional beings, and that God is okay with that. In fact, he created us with the capacity and the propensity to feel and express emotion. He does not want us to perpetually repress our feelings and become perennial feeling-stuffers. Indeed he created humans and not Vulcans from Star Trek for a reason. However, the Psalms and the Bible as a whole are in agreement that our feelings on this side of the garden of Eden are flawed. They don't function as God intended them to. Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro is famous for coining the phrase, "Facts don't care about your feelings," but the inverse of this is also abundantly true. Our feelings don't care about the facts. They seem to act independently of what we know to be true and therefore lead us astray almost constantly.

I experienced this in a powerful way this year at school. I am an RA at Northwestern. This past year I served in an all-male building on an all-male staff with seven other guys. One week we decided to play a game called assassin. In this game each of us drew the name of another staff member and our task was to eliminate the person that we selected by tagging them before we were eliminated by the person who selected us. When you eliminated someone, your next goal was to eliminate the person that they had selected, and this was to continue until there was only one man left in the game, the winner, the manliest man.

Well, after three days of being paranoid, spending most of my time off campus or in my room, and sprinting between classes, there were three of us left. It was determined by our boss that the three remaining player would gather in the student center and battle it out in a sort of grand finale face-off. As it turned out the other two guys, Robbie and Beau, decided to team up against me. I gave it my all, but, needless to say, I was the first one eliminated from this championship matchup and ended in third place.

So here is where the story applies to our passage today. The fact of the matter was that this game was completely meaningless. It didn't matter one bit. And in my head I knew that. But in my heart, I was angry. No, I was furious. I was absolutely indignant at the injustice that had eliminated me from the game. I spent days on guard, all to be eliminated by a stupid alliance! I was so mad that I couldn't even watch the rest of the face-off. I went back to my dorm room and fumed and pouted and then called Hannah and complained to her about how unfair it all was.

The facts were that the game didn't matter, and even if it did I finished third, which is pretty good. But my feelings didn't care about the facts. They cared about my own ego and reputation, and this very same thing happens to us in real life. Despite what we know to be true, our circumstances and our feelings lead us astray, and this is the reality that Psalm 42-43 speak into. Often times life is really hard, and our hearts disregard the truth and produce totally deceptive feelings. And to this reality Psalm 42-43 say this:

Because our hearts forget that God does not fail his people, right worship involves a repetitious declaration of God's perfect faithfulness.

And to do this, the psalmist addresses our baseline heart condition, describes how that heart condition is oppressed in difficult times, and shows us how we should respond. So let's jump in.

**1. We want God with a desire that produces pursuit.
(v. 1-2)**

The psalmist begins by presenting the thing that is most fundamental to him. This thing is on the forefront of his mind and heart and in expressing how he is feeling, this bubbles up first: I need God. But this is a certain variety of need, isn't it.

People with severely damaged or infected limbs need an amputation. This amputation will change their life. It will make many things more difficult and cause them much pain. But it is the alternative to death, so they need it. But that is a very different kind of need. People with cancer often times need chemotherapy. They do not need the sickness and weakness that it will bring, but it is the only means to life, so they need it. This is a different kind of need as well.

The kind of need this poem is talking about is the need that the man who has been held underwater for 3 minutes has for a breath of fresh air. His lungs are burning and his muscles are starting to seize up for lack of oxygen. His vision is blurring and his head feels like it's about to explode from the pressure. There is only one thing on his mind and only one desire in his heart, air. And this desire is not stagnant or apathetic, it burns inside him and demands that he fight with everything he has for the air. Nothing else matters, he needs air. This is how the people of God desire God. God is not the lesser of two evils like the amputation, and he is not the unpleasant means to a desired end like the chemo. He is the air.

But before we move on, I want to briefly address another way this could look. Sometimes, when our hearts stray or are oppressed as we will talk about in a minute, the best we can do is to want to want God. In this case, desire for God and God are the air and we seek them as one. In these cases, we strive for the desire in the same way that strive for God because he is worthy of our desire and our souls are made to desire him.

And why is God so desirable for the psalmist? The man underwater yearns for air because he knows what it is and what it will do. It will relieve and revive him. Similarly, the poet wants God because he knows God and believes what he knows. Verse 2- He believes that God is living and active, not passive or dormant. Verse 8- he knows that God is the source of his life. Verse 9- God is his source of stability and consistency, his rock. Verse 2- God is the only place where he finds shelter and refuge when he is under attack. Verse 4- God is his only source of abundant, consistent, exceeding joy. In light of this man's vision of God, it is no wonder that he desires him so much. And a desire like this never lies apathetically within a person's heart. Rather, it always inspires action. So the psalmist asks, "When shall I come and appear before God?" like a child on a long road trip asks "Are we there yet?" It is a question filled with dissatisfaction with the current state of things and doing everything possible to get to the thing asked for.

Friends, we ought to desire and pursue God in this way. Totally focused and totally discontent with being distanced from him. It ought to fill our hearts with joy when we get time in his presence and it ought to make us distraught and thirsty when we don't get it. This is the base-line heart attitude of the people of God. We cannot lament the hard and wrong things in the world as God wants us to when our primary desire is something other than him.

There is problem with this though, isn't there.

2. Our desire and pursuit are oppressed and our hearts forget God (v.3-4, 7, 9-10, 43:2)

Although we desperately want God, this world and this life are constantly beating down that desire and obstructing that pursuit. And, when this happen, we tend to forget who we know God to be and what we used to believe he would do. Specifically, I think there are three things that really oppress our desire for and pursuit of God: other voices, our circumstances, and our feelings.

a. Other voices

The dominant question of the enemy of God to the believer in God is repeated in verses 3 and 10: Where is your God? In other words where are the results? Look at all the pain in the world; where is your God? I prayed and nothing happened; where is your God? Christians have murdered and stolen and deceived and done it all in the name of Jesus; Where is your God? Look at what that person did to you, how they wronged you, how they hurt you, Where is your God? You are young and sick and dying; Where is your God? In my own life the question has gone: look at your failure to have victory in this sin struggle and your failure to bring restoration to this relationship and your failure to do this thing right; Where is your God? To put it simply; what advantage is there to being a Christian at all?

And sometimes this question in its various forms is painful for us. It is a deadly wound in our bones. It brings us to place where our tears are our food day and night. A place where the tears are always pushing at the back of our eyes only

a second away from bursting out in weeping. And it is such a powerful question for the enemy to ask for two reasons. First and foremost, we sometimes don't know the answer. We don't know what God is doing in our lives. We don't know how these things could possibly fit into his plan. We ask along with the psalmist when will I come and appear before God? God my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why are my enemies oppressing me and causing me to mourn? Because God's ways are not our ways, sometimes we just don't know the answer. Second, this question takes our eyes off of the things that God has promised us and puts them on the things that the world thinks God should have promised us. This question robs us of the joy we once had by making the blessings of God and God himself seem insignificant and insufficient. Indeed, other voices oppress our desire for and pursuit of God.

b. Our circumstances

Verse 6 tells us that our psalmist is in the land of Jordan and of Hermon, at Mount Mizar. Now, we don't know exactly where he is referring to, but we can be sure of this: he is far from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where is home is and where the people of God are. Jerusalem is where is the temple is, where the presence of God that he longs for so much dwells. The place he is at right now just seems so wrong compared to where he longs to be.

And how often is this the case with us. Whether it is our physical location or the job we are in or the season of life we are in or the status of our relationships or the vitality of our spiritual life. So often we are just not where we want to be. We see our present situation as being unfair or impossibly hard or downright wrong. It doesn't make sense to us and we can't seem to get a handle on what it is we are supposed to do. And a

lot of times, we are right. Our circumstances are hard and confusing and messed up, because we live in a world that sin has made that way. But so often when this is the case, we become so preoccupied with the incorrectness of life and the world that we forget to look at God all together. We allow our circumstances to obstruct our view of the God that we truly desire and our path to the God we pursue.

c. Our feelings

The psalmist tells us that his soul is cast down, that it is in turmoil, that his tears have been his food. He is so distraught that he does not eat, he only weeps. Martin Lloyd Jones called this state spiritual depression. Now, before we move forward, I must be abundantly clear that what I am discussing in this point and in this sermon as a whole is not clinical depression. I am not an expert in psychology, but I know that clinical depression is often times a physiological biological condition that has little to do with the thought processes or the faith of the individual who is suffering from it. I believe that these two varieties of depression can be linked and feed one another, and I believe that this is actually quite common, but they are distinct and can appear separately and we as Christians should not be so ignorant to disregard the physiological aspects of clinical depression by encouraging sufferers to simply believe better. This is not to say that God does not heal the biological causes of clinical depression, he can and he does, but it is to say that it is not necessarily faithless nor unbiblical to accept God's provision of appropriate medication at the proper time.

Now, back to spiritual depression. It seems as though the feelings experienced by the psalmist have bubbled up out of the circumstances he is in and the other voices in his life. Look at verse 7. **(Read 7)**. The poet feels as though he is being

pounded down by the force of several roaring waterfalls while being crashed over by the waves of the ocean. He feels as though his soul is drowning under the powerful waters that surround him. He is completely and helplessly overwhelmed. But look at the pronouns in verse 7, what are they? Your. Who is the your referring to? God. The psalmist looks around him and within himself and feels as though he is being crushed and drowned. He feels helpless and utterly alone. And yet, he looks around at the waterfalls that beat him against the riverbed and the waves that suck him under then slam him against the rocky shore over and over and over again. And he says to God, "O God, who I have desired above all else and pursued without regard to other things, these waterfalls and these waves, they are yours." Wow.

But wait, there's more. We have arrived at the punch line of this song. Look at verse 8. **(Read 8)**. The psalmist could have allowed his feelings and his perception of his situation to rule his conclusion and said, "God, you were not worthy of my desire and pursuit after all. I'm done with you." But instead he remembers God and returns to what he knows to be true. The waterfalls and the waves are indeed God's, but they are not a slip of his hand or a cruel trick. The Lord commands his steadfast love. It is an stoppable, unwavering laser beam locked onto the hearts of his people so that they receive an unceasing, relentless flow of grace and loving kindness directly from the hand of God. He says to God and to his own soul, "These waterfalls and these waves are tossing me and bruising me and it feels like I'm going to drown, but they are not meaningless. They are the commanded instruments of the steadfast love of the God who is and ever has been and ever will be my rock, my life, my refuge, and my exceeding joy. This laser beam of love has never ever failed and it is not failing now. So if roaring waterfalls and pounding waves are the gracious avenue to the

glorious presence of God, then Lord, may I ever, only, always drown.”

So how do we respond to the oppression of our desire for and pursuit of God?

3. We respond with the truth.

After we have laid our souls bare before God, look at verse 6. **(Read 6)**. We remember God. Friends, your sickness, your financial troubles, your broken family, your hurts, the terrible things that have been done to you and the difficult consequences of the things you have done, even your depression, They are the waterfalls. They are the waves. And the truth for the people of God is that these bad things are not the failures or lapses of God’s steadfast love towards you. They are the special graces of God designed to keep you from the very worst thing: us walking away from him. The waves are not God’s failure, they are his faithfulness. They are increasing your eternal joy by saving you from the poisonous pleasures of this world. And this is true because of the work of Christ. All the wrath and fury that our sin had earned from the hand of God was used up in Jesus’s body on the cross, and all that remains for those who are in him is the steadfast, laser-like love of God.

So when our desire and pursuit are oppressed, this is the truth that we respond with. God wants us to be honest with him, to pour out our hearts to him, but he does not want us to stop there. We must redirect our flow of emotion with the reality of God’s perfect faithfulness and demand that our souls hope in God. Friends, our hope slides onto other things so quickly, to people or to achievements or to circumstances, but these things always fail. When we confront our hearts with truth, we force ourselves to choose between our own fickle

feelings and the Father’s faithfulness, and when confronted with these two options the choice is simple.

After we have rehearsed the faithfulness of God over and over again, then we can do as the psalmist does and request boldly from God. He loves to answer the prayers of a soul that has been formed and corrected and redirected by the truth. Here’s why. **(Read 3-4)**. The primary request of this soul is to once again drink deeply from the presence of God and praise him from an unobstructed heart. What this soul wants most is not a change of circumstances, but a new vision of God that will satisfy it in whatever circumstance may arise.

In this undeniably wrong world, God is our only hope, and hope in him is never ever misplaced. In your difficulties this week, be honest with God. Pour out your heart to him, and demand the next step of your heart to be toward God. Whether you feel like it or not, you need air, so fight it until God is once again refreshing and restoring and sweet to your soul. In short, hope in God.