

## The Gospel & Depression

### Psalms 42–43

*“Driving through life with the parking brake on.”*<sup>1</sup>

*“A . . . howling tempest in the brain.”*<sup>2</sup>

*“Malignant sadness.”*<sup>3</sup>

*“In depression, it is as though you lack shock absorbers for the potholes, so that these make you bottom out easily.”*<sup>4</sup>

*“Depression may feel like the insides are all knotted up, or it may feel like nothing at all. . . . It may cause hair-trigger response to the most minor incidents or complete ambivalence to major events. It can lead to binge eating or a complete lack of appetite. Depression becomes all-consuming. It becomes self-subsisting, offering tears for food.”*<sup>5</sup>

*“Depression is not just negative thinking. [It] is not just being ‘down.’ It is being cast to the very end of your tether and, quite frankly, being dropped.”*<sup>6</sup>

Such is the testimony of those who have walked through the stubborn darkness we know as depression. Ed Welch, a counselor and professor, writes: “Depression is a form of suffering that can’t be reduced to one universal cause.”<sup>7</sup> It can be *situational*, a response to circumstances in life, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a nagging sense of failure or insecurity, guilt or shame. And it can be *clinical*, when your brain is not doing what it’s supposed to do, such as a chemical imbalance. Or both. It can range in severity from bothersome and annoying to utterly debilitating. Welch continues, “Depression is painful and, if you have never experienced it, hard to understand. Like most forms of suffering, it feels private and isolating.”<sup>8</sup>

Depression is not a popular subject in the church. We tend to avoid what we don’t understand, and depression is notoriously complex. But worse than avoidance, it often carries a stigma. We think, perhaps we’ve even been told, that Christians are supposed to be happy, healthy, and well-adjusted. And so if we face depression or any variety of mental illnesses, then something must be wrong with us. Our faith is not strong enough. We’re not praying enough, or reading our Bible

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<sup>1</sup> Charlet Allshouse.

<sup>2</sup> William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 38. As cited in Edward T. Welch, *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>3</sup> “Spirit of the Age,” *The Economist*, December 19, 1998, 113. As cited in Welch, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Green-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 155.

<sup>6</sup> Green-McCreight, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Welch, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, 4.

enough. We don't dare speak honestly and openly about it, for fear of what others will think. So we put our head down and try to gut through it, even while it hollows us out.

But the sad and potentially dangerous reality is that we're avoiding an issue that by some estimates affects 25% of our congregation in a given year.<sup>9</sup> And even if we don't face it personally, someone we love probably does.

Depression is real. Whether clinical or situational, it's part of life in a fallen world. We need to be honest about the difficulties and darkness of depression. But we also need to remember that *depression is not beyond hope*. Not if the gospel of Jesus has anything to say about it. Jared Wilson writes, "What the Christian can be sure of, and what the depressed Christian can reasonably hope, is that while the darkness may be bigger than us, Christ is bigger than the darkness."<sup>10</sup>

That's what I want to talk about this morning, the gospel and depression. In our current series we're looking at what practical difference the good news of Jesus makes for all of life, and at this point in the series, what difference the gospel makes in me, in my heart and personal life.

A few clarifications as we venture into this topic. You need to know that I am addressing this topic not as a doctor, or a therapist, or a psychologist—I am none of those things—I am addressing it as a pastor. And I'm speaking not as an expert, but as someone who is still learning. And I have to confess I've not always handled this subject with understanding and compassion, particularly in my marriage. My wife Carissa experienced postpartum depression with all four of our children. We didn't know what was happening after Joshua; we figured it out when Moriah was born. But I'll tell you we had some of the worst fights of our marriage during those times, largely because I simply could not understand what was wrong, why she was so worried or afraid. It didn't make sense to me. And because I couldn't understand it or control it, I got mad.

So I've had to learn a lot. And I'm still learning. But I'm convinced for the health of our souls, we need to gain a gospel perspective on this subject. And to do so we're looking at Psalms 42–43.<sup>11</sup>

The Book of Psalms is all about walking with God amid a fallen world—a world that doesn't work the way it's supposed to. They give poetic expression to the full range of human experience and emotion, from the mountain tops of praise to the valleys of what's called *lament*. And Mark Futato writes, "The Book of Psalms contains more songs of lament than any other kind of psalm. . . . Feelings of grief, loneliness, perplexity, anger, frustration, abandonment, despair, and more come to expression in the lyrics of these songs."<sup>12</sup>

The lament psalms give voice to our pain and frustration. Think about it—God has written lyrics for us for times when we're downcast or depressed. Futato explains,

Through the laments the Holy Spirit gives us great encouragement and great freedom to bring to expression all that we are thinking and feeling, whether those thoughts and feelings are

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ed Welch, "Hope for the Depressed," Jan. 10, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ccef.org/hope-depressed>.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, 150.

<sup>11</sup> The lament psalms are perhaps our best window into the Bible's view of depression. One might also see examples of depression in Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:4), Jonah (Jonah 4:3, 8), Paul (2 Cor. 1:8), and even Jesus (Mk. 14:34).

<sup>12</sup> Mark D. Futato, *Joy Comes in the Morning: Psalms for All Seasons* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 50.

about ourselves, others, or even God himself. . . . stuffing our thoughts and emotions does not help at all, and expressing how we feel and what we think is part of the path to renewal.<sup>13</sup>

Psalms 42-43 are one such lament. We're looking at them together because most likely, these were originally one psalm. Not only do they address the same subject, but they share a lot of repeated lines, especially the refrain in 42:5, 11, and 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."<sup>14</sup>

And there you can hear the psalmist's problem: his soul is downcast and in turmoil. He writes honestly, from a place of deep sadness and pain. And yet he writes with hope. "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

And it's these two characteristics—honesty and hope—that shape this psalm and give us a gospel perspective on the matter of depression. Because the gospel is honest about all that's wrong with this fallen world, from our own sin to the suffering, sadness, and sorrow we face, it frees us to be honest about something like depression. But because the gospel also points us to one ultimate solution for all that's wrong—how God is making all things new through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in our place—the gospel at the same time gives us hope that Christ is bigger than our depression. Let's look first at the psalmist's honest expression of turmoil.

### **Face Depression with Honesty**

If you look at the superscript (the small print just before v. 1), we're told that this psalm was written by the sons of Korah. "Korah was one of the Levitical musicians placed in charge of temple worship by David and Solomon."<sup>15</sup> So the author, whoever he was, followed in this same line and function—he was a worship leader. And you see that in how he describes his experience—v. 4: "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."

But what happens when the worship leader, whose job is to usher the people of God into the joyful presence of God, feels utterly abandoned by God? That's what he describes in the opening verses. Verse 1:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?<sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"<sup>4</sup> 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. (42:1-4)

In contrast to his past joy as worship leader, the psalmist is starved for God's presence. The first two verses here are pretty familiar to many of us. Unfortunately, as one author writes,

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<sup>13</sup> Futato, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the fact that ch. 43 lacks its own superscript is further evidence to suggest the two belong together.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 670. See also 1 Chron. 6:16-44; 15:5-24; 16:41-42; 25:1-8; Pss. 44-49; 84-85; 87-88.

We . . . put them on a coffee mug to be sold in a Christian bookstore, obscuring the bitter lament with clichéd spirituality. We sing these lines in a popular praise chorus pleasantly, contentedly. But this is a cry of a person dying of thirst. He is gasping for God like a parched man in the desert gasps through cracked lips for water.<sup>16</sup>

His tears have been his food day and night (v. 3). He's so distraught that he has no appetite. Just sadness to feed on. And sometimes in depression that sadness can hit for no reason. "Nothing particularly sad has occurred, but deep sadness strikes, bringing uncontrollable weeping at the slightest event or no event at all."<sup>17</sup>

Many people don't know that Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, fought depression through much of his ministry. Reflecting on his bouts, he said, "I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for."<sup>18</sup> And he felt great shame over it, when he saw others with trials far more severe, yet rejoicing in the Lord.

So it is in our passage—not only are the psalmist's tears his food, they are also his accuser. "While they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" (42:3). 'If God really loved you, you wouldn't be so sad. If God were really present, he'd make this better. There's only one explanation—he's abandoned you. And it's probably your fault.'

That's what the psalmist feels. And the amazing thing is, *he tells God about it!* Can a worship leader do that? Can Christians do that? We must do that. We must be honest with God.

But as it is in life, so it is in this psalm, that the depression hits him in waves. He rallies for the refrain in v. 5, which both expresses his distress and points him in the direction of hope: "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" (42:5-6a). But then in v. 6 we read his honest lament again. "My soul is cast down within me." Verse 7: "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." That's quite a picture. Think of the dark chaos of the ocean floor (deep calling to deep), then the pounding weight of standing under a waterfall, and then the force of being tossed to and fro by the rolling ocean waves, and put it all together: that's the weight of oppression and sorrow that he feels.

Verse 9: "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 continually, 'Where is your God?' (42:9-10). His soul taunts him. His enemies taunt him. And God is nowhere. Even as the third wave hits him, in 43:2, he says, "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?"

We need to be honest when faced with depression. And we need to give freedom to our friends and loved ones to be honest about it as well. The stigma needs to go away. Compassion and patience and prayer need to replace it. We need to be willing to ask for help. If you're battling this on your own, whether out of fear, or shame, or even pride, we need to put that away and bring it into the light. That might be talking to a friend or a parent, or a pastor. It might be talking

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<sup>16</sup> J. C. Wilson, 154.

<sup>17</sup> J. C. Wilson, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Darrel Amundsen, "The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon," *Christian History* 10 (1991), 64. As cited in Welch, 9.

to your doctor, or a professional Christian counselor. That might even mean being willing to go on medication if it's necessary. We're obviously an over-medicated society as it is. But as Ed Stetzer writes, "if we are not afraid to put a cast on a broken bone, then why are we ashamed of a balanced plan to treat mental illness that might include medication to stabilize possible chemical imbalances?"<sup>19</sup>

And we need to make space for this honesty in the church. In April of 2013, the evangelical world was shocked out of apathy when author and megachurch pastor, Rick Warren's son committed suicide. Matthew had suffered from depression and mental illness for years. In the wake of that shock, when asked how churches can best reach out to those in the congregation who might be struggling with depression or anxiety, Rebekah Lyons wrote,

Churches can talk about it, and talk about it often. I'm a firm believer that secrets lose power when they exit the dark. Confession is a healing balm toward connectivity and we're loved to the measure we are known. The more we name our struggles, the more others have permission to do the same. I can't think of a more perfect medium to provide this healing community than the church.<sup>20</sup>

We need to make space for an honest conversation. Because it's only when we bring it into the light that we can truly apply the hope of the gospel to it. And that's where this psalm leads us—not just honesty, but hope.

### **Face Depression with Hope**

We see that hope in the refrain of 42:5, 11, and 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." But we even see it begin to break through in the second wave in vv. 6-10. Interwoven with the honest expressions of pain, we read things like v. 6: "My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar."

Twice in this passage the psalmist, amid the pain, turns to memory. At first his memory is a contrast for how miserable he is, back in v. 4. But here in v. 6 it's a means of coping, giving hope. "My soul is cast down within me; *therefore* I remember . . ." Kathryn Green-McCreight writes, a theologian who suffers from bipolar disorder, writes, "When one is depressed, memory fill in the gaps that feeling has left vacant. One can't feel God's grace, but one can remember it. The heaviness of the soul . . . is counteracted by remembrance of concrete places and acts God has done."<sup>21</sup>

The psalmist remembers times of God's closeness, his historic faithfulness.<sup>22</sup> He remembers the land of Jordan, Mount Hermon and Mizar, where God led the Israelites safely into the land he promised them. In the same way, we today can look back to God's concrete act of salvation in the cross. I may not be able to feel God's love and presence now, but I know it's true because the

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<sup>19</sup> Ed Stetzer, "My Take: How churches can respond to mental illness," *CNN Belief Blog*, April 7, 2013. Available at: <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/04/07/my-take-how-churches-can-respond-to-mental-illness/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ed Stetzer, "Freefall to Fly: An Interview with Rebekah Lyons on Anxiety, Depression, and Freedom," *The Exchange*, April 15, 2013. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/april/freefall-to-fly-interview-with-rebekah-lyons-on-anxiety.html?paging=off>.

<sup>21</sup> Green-McCreight, 88, 91.

<sup>22</sup> J. C. Wilson, 159.

cross proves it. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

Because of the cross, we know God’s loyal love is for us. 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.” There’s a strange but comforting irony in vv. 8-9: it’s his confidence in God’s steadfast love that frees him to ask God, “Why have you forgotten me?” “What I know to be true, and what I’m currently experiencing don’t seem to line up. So, Lord, I need your help.” 43:1:

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me! <sup>2</sup> 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? <sup>3</sup> Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! <sup>4</sup> 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. (43:1-4)

And there in v. 3, the psalmist puts his finger on it. When we’re trapped in the darkness, what we need more than anything is God’s light and truth.

Lies fester in the darkness. Lies that tell you you’re all alone. That nobody will ever understand you. That what you’ve done is unforgivable. That God is done with you. You’ll never be good enough for him. That he’s out to get you. He’s just waiting for one more mess up and then the hammer’s going to fall. That you should be afraid. And that you’ll never be free. That as much as you hate this anxiety and sadness, as much as you claim to love and trust God, there is no key for the prison cell you’re in, no way out except for death.

Those are lies. But the truth of the gospel tells us something different. It tells us that even when you feel alone, you’re not alone. That God will never leave you nor forsake you. The gospel tells us that yes, sin is sinful, but God’s grace through Christ is sufficient. That Jesus’ blood really was enough to pay the full debt of your sin, and bear the full weight of God’s wrath in your place. The gospel tells you that there is meaning in your suffering. As senseless as it seems, the Lord will not waste it. But in some mysterious way, our suffering finds its significance as it’s folded into the suffering of Christ. “There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper still.”<sup>23</sup> And as we identify with our Savior in his suffering, our eyes and hearts are then directed to his resurrection. That death does not win. Sin and darkness and sadness do not win; life and hope and joy and peace and the unending presence God—they win through our Savior Jesus Christ.

This is the truth of the gospel. The truth and light that bring hope in the face of depression. And just as we need to be honest about sorrow, so we need to remind ourselves daily of this hope.

That’s what we see the psalmist doing in the refrain. As each new wave of sorrow and darkness hits him, he responds to it by preaching to himself. “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (43:5). When he addresses his soul, he’s quite literally talking to himself. He’s interrogating himself—“why are you downcast, and why are you in turmoil within me?” He’s acknowledging his sorrow honestly, but he’s also *challenging* it. And he does so by telling himself to hope. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

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<sup>23</sup> Attributed to Corrie Ten Boom’s sister, Betsie, as cited in J. C. Wilson, 159.

According to Paul Tripp, “No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. You are in an unending conversation with yourself. You are talking to yourself all the time, interpreting, organizing, and analyzing what’s going on inside you and around you.”<sup>24</sup> But as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”<sup>25</sup> When we listen to ourselves, what we hear being played over and over again is that laundry list of lies. It’s on constant replay. We need to talk to ourselves, to preach to ourselves (and to one another) the gospel of Jesus. The truth and light that challenges the darkness.

And so as Jared Wilson encourages us,

Tell yourself that you are loved by God, that Christ has died in your stead, that the Spirit lives in you, consecrating you to God and guaranteeing your salvation. Inform yourself that Jesus is your defense attorney, that he pleads his blood in response to every charge brought against you. Tell your depression that its days are numbered, and even if it should—God forbid—last till your dying breath, it will thus be vanquished for all eternity while you escape to everlasting joy. . . . You will outlast your depression, because Christ in you, the hope of glory, will outlast it.<sup>26</sup>

“Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” “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” (Ps. 43:3-4).

Depression is big, but Christ is bigger. Sadness can run deep, but Christ is deeper still. When your soul is downcast and in turmoil, be honest and take hope in the gospel.

Now I want to remind us once again, this doesn’t mean that if you just trust Jesus more, all of this will go away. Jesus is the answer, but sometimes our brains have a hard time believing that, even when we tell ourselves over and over. Sometimes they need a little coaching through a trained counselor. Sometimes they need medication to clear them up. Meds “will not give you hope, but they might make you feel less miserable.”<sup>27</sup> And there’s nothing wrong with that.

As Tim Keller says,

While we can’t fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are chemically based and require medication, we also cannot fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are simply a matter of lacking spiritual disciplines. Schizophrenia, bipolar depression, and a host of other psychological problems are rooted in physiological problems that call for medical treatment, not simple talk therapy.<sup>28</sup>

David Murray adds,

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Tripp, *A Shelter in the Time of Storm* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 56.

<sup>25</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) as cited in J. C. Wilson, 156.

<sup>26</sup> J. C. Wilson, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Welch, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Keller, as cited in Ed Stetzer, “Mental Illness & Medication vs. Spiritual Struggles & Biblical Counseling,” *Pastors.com*, April 26, 2013. Available at: <http://pastors.com/meds-vs-spiritual/>.

If there's one thing we can all do, it's to avoid making our own experience the rule for others. . . . Just because medication worked for you, does not mean it will work for everyone else. Just because biblical counseling alone worked for you, doesn't mean it's the answer for everyone else. Just because you've never been depressed, doesn't mean depression does not exist. Cases are so different, and causes are so complex, that we need to exercise charity, sympathy, and patience in all our dealings with one another.<sup>29</sup>

We need to face depression with honesty—our own depression, our spouse's or child's, our parent's, friend's, or colleague's. We need to create space in the church to deal with it—which by the way, we're working on doing, possibly through starting a *Celebrate Recovery* group here.

But we need to create that space so that we can apply the hope of the gospel. The fact that we have a Savior who knows what it feels like to suffer, and can sympathize with our weaknesses. Who plead in the garden, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mk. 14:34). Who took on himself the abandonment and isolation we feel, and was in fact literally abandoned by the Father on the cross that he might pay the penalty of our sin, as he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). We have a Savior who did not stay in the darkness of the tomb, but through death brought life. Who is making all things new. And who in the end, "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

"Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

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<sup>29</sup> David Murray, "Double Dangers: Maximizing and Minimizing Mental Illness," *Head, Heart, Hand Blog*, April 16, 2013. <http://headhearhand.org/blog/2013/04/16/maximizing-and-minimizing-mental-illness/>