



Women's Bible Study
A Godly Response to Life's Realities: A Study in the Psalms
Psalm 42: In Spiritual Depression
October 25, 2006
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Have you ever been spiritually dry? I mean hard-dry like the ground in a drought. Has your life felt empty and barren like a desert producing only thistles and thorns? Have you longed for God and been thirsty for Him, like wanting a cold drink when you are very hot or when you are ill with the flu and can't have any liquid? I remember as a child when I was sick like that, a song by a country western star, Roy Rogers, would go over and over in my mind about "cool, clear water" ---only making my desire for water more acute. The writer of Psalm 42 feels this empty barrenness, a deep longing and thirsting for God and begins with a description of a female deer panting and struggling to reach water to quench her thirst.

Let's open our Bibles and read Psalm 42 and 43. The repeated refrain in 42: 5 & 11 and 43:5 indicate that these two psalms were at one time one. No one seems to know why they were separated. They were written by the sons of Korah who were worship leaders in the sanctuary. The writer here was evidently a Levite exiled among Gentiles (43:1), a worship leader who had led groups of pilgrims to Jerusalem for the various festivals. He was now unable to go and his heart was grieved because he felt the Lord had forgotten him (42:9 & 43:2). In these two psalms he questions and wonders why God doesn't do something for him to deliver him from his oppressors and restore him to his duties of enjoying God's presence in the temple. This psalm is very personal--containing over 50 personal pronouns. There are three stages the writer goes through in his time of spiritual depression that I believe we can apply to our own lives.

These two Psalms are very personal, containing over 50 personal pronouns. As the writer struggles with his emotions and his faith, we can observe three different stages that I believe can be applied to our lives.

LONGING FOR GOD---Psalm 42:1-5 --- The First Stage

The writer of this psalm is experiencing spiritual depression and longing for God's presence in his life. Because of being in exile he missed worship in God's sanctuary. Notice in verses 1-3 the essentials of physical life that he mentions---air (panting), water (water and thirsting), and food.

Day and night (vs 3 & 8) he felt the pain caused by separation from God's sanctuary and by the constant ridicule of the people around him. He "fed" on his grief and his tears became his food. In verse 8 he tells us that the living God was the God of his life and without Him everything else is meaningless. He longed for his relationship with God and his service to be restored.

In Psalm 63:1 & 6 we see that David had a similar experience of longing for God and feeling empty.

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.

Don't you just love the psalms and how the writers can express on paper, what we are feeling in our own hearts and lives? We all get depressed at times and get down in the dumps. We feel like God has forgotten us and we will never get back on track again. We wonder why this is happening to us, especially if we are Christians. Sometimes we can identify with Erma Bombeck, who asks in the title of one of her best-selling books, *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I Living in the Pits?*

Let's take a few moments to consider the causes of "spiritual depression". We are not talking about clinical depression here, which is a physical condition requiring medical attention. Spiritual depression however, may accompany clinical depression. Some causes for spiritual depression that the writer of this psalm experienced were the loss of worship in his home community, taunts of unbelievers (Where is your God?), memories of better days and what God had done in the past, and the failure of God to act quickly on his behalf. In relating this to our personal lives, other causes could be loss of family or friends, loss of a job, illness or physical conditions, exhaustion, disappointments, personal failure, the burdens of old age, or a "let down" after a great blessing. You have all probably experienced one or more of these I have listed and the accompanying spiritual depression and longing for God to make himself real to you and help you out of your situation.

There are a number of examples in the Bible of people who experienced longing for God, spiritual depression and dry periods; Joseph, Moses, Hannah, Nehemiah, Job and David. Also in modern times we have some giants of the faith that experienced spiritual depression; Martin Luther, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Miss Wetherall Johnson, the founder of Bible Study Fellowship International.

For our study today I've chosen a few excerpts from the life of Elijah, in 1 Kings 19:1-18 which illustrates some of the causes of spiritual depression. Elijah has just experienced the supernatural power of God at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40) when he prayed before all the people of Israel, King Ahab, and the prophets of Baal to prove that God is the one true God. In verse 38 it says, "the fire of the Lord came down from heaven and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench." All the prophets of Baal were destroyed. But now Jezebel, the queen is after him. So Elijah runs for his life. He is emotional, physically, and spiritually drained. At this point Elijah says, "I have had enough, take my life". (1 Kings 19:4).

Then God steps in and sends an angel to minister to Elijah who has fallen asleep under a broom tree. He is awakened by the angel who has "a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water." He eats and drinks and falls asleep again. The angel wakes him a second time with food and water and urges him to eat and drink to be fortified for his journey of 40 days and 40 nights to reach Mt. Horeb where God meets with Elijah and encourages him. Elijah thinks he is the only God-fearing person left (1 Kings 19:14), but God tells him that actually there are 7000 godly people in Israel (1 Kings 19:18).

Sometimes we too like Elijah can experience a big let down after a spiritual victory in our service for the Lord. We may be suffering from fatigue and exhaustion. These are tools that satan often uses to attack us and try to convince us that we are ineffective and insignificant. Do you sometimes feel weary and worn out in whatever task the Lord has given you? Have you been so "bone tired" and discouraged that you were ready to give up?

Galations 6:9 - Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

When we feel spiritually depressed or are experiencing a "dry period," it is a good idea to take inventory of the past few weeks or months. Have we had a very heavy schedule of activities? Have there been some unusual circumstances causing anxiety and worry? Has there been a physical condition that has arisen? Maybe we are just physically exhausted and we need to take time out and rest under our "broom tree" like Elijah and let God minister to us. Notice how the Lord gives him the basics---good food and sleep to restore him and then encourages him with His words.

I believe that the Lord allows these "dry times" in our lives to strengthen our faith. Notice the writer of this psalm is in a foreign land and being ridiculed by the people there. Everything about his life is different and he is remembering and longing for it to be the way it was before. He remembers serving in the temple and the enjoyment of worshipping God. He is pleading with the Lord to set him free and take him back to Jerusalem.

Remembering can be a blessing or a tool of satan to put us in the midst of a "pity party". It's easy to remember the past and exaggerate the good parts and forget that there may have been some problems

then too. We may be so focused on the past that we miss the blessings of the present and the new ways God is working in our lives.

Focusing on the past blinds us to God's blessings in the present.

The psalmist confronts himself and the situation and admonishes himself to not be downcast, but to hope in the Lord. His hopes had been shattered, his prayers were unanswered, he was being taunted by his enemies, his emotions were almost more than he could handle---but, God was still with him and in control, he would put his hope in Him.

*42:5 - Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

This verse reminds us of a New Testament verse that has the same principle. Whatever is happening in our lives, we are to still praise the Lord.

1 Thess 5:18 - Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Often I believe God allows these "spiritually dry times" in our lives to draw us closer to Him to learn more about who He is, His character, and His unfailing love and faithfulness to us. I'm reading an interesting book by Ruth Haley Barton; *Invitation to Solitude and Silence--Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*. She points out that in our busy, noisy world that is bombarding us from every side with choices and responsibilities, it is a challenge to set aside time to develop the discipline of solitude and silence.

As she began her pursuit of being silent before the Lord, a mentor, friend told her "Ruth, you are like a jar of river water all shaken up. What you need is to sit still long enough that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear." She found it very hard at first to "sit still" because she was active in ministry and always had an agenda, prayer list, or a study plan to attend to. She recognized here was God's invitation to come and spend time with Him---to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

Personal Application---In this "dry time" in my life is God inviting me to "be still and know" Him in a deeper way?

We all have very busy lives, how can we carve out time to spend with God---beyond doing Bible Study and daily prayer? Will you join with me to try something for the next few weeks? To start by spending just 5 minutes in total silence before God---asking Him for nothing but just being in His presence.

Scripture often refers to God as "Abba" which is Aramaic for Father, an endearing term equivalent to "Daddy". Jesus used the word "Abba" to address His Father, God. Remember sitting on your Daddy's lap and how "special" that was? You didn't have to say anything --- you just enjoyed being there and being held in his arms. Let God love you and hold you in His arms for 5 minutes each day, (you can extend your time as long as you wish) and see if it doesn't make a difference in how much more you know Him.

REMEMBERING GOD - 42:6-11 --- The Second Stage

The psalmist continues to remember in the next verses, but he is no longer dwelling on the past ---his "good old days" in Jerusalem. He isn't thinking about "What I don't have now", but instead focuses on remembering who God is and what He has done.

*42:6 My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon---from Mount Mizar.*

He's remembering God from special places in his homeland. We see a similar response from David in Psalm 63:2-5

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

Both of these psalm writers experienced a deep longing for God and His presence again, and they both resolve to focus on God and who He is and raise their voices in praise remembering that only He can satisfy their souls.

The word “remember” is an important word in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament the children of Israel were commanded to remember the Lord and not forget all the ways He had provided for them, and follow in obedience, as Jann taught us last week. In the New Testament, believers are to remember the sacrifice Jesus paid for our sins, and remember all his teachings on how to live the abundant life. Throughout the Bible God remembers His children.

Isaiah 43:25 - I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Hebrews 8:12 For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

As I mentioned before, I believe God often allows us to struggle and experience “dry times” to teach us some important lessons and to “sift” or separate the chaff from the wheat in our lives. Sometimes we are caught up in the temporal things of life instead of focusing on what has eternal value.

Illustration—A number of years ago the Lord allowed some trying circumstances to “sift” out some of the chaff in my life. We lived in Arizona and were preparing to make our annual August pilgrimage back to Minnesota and Nebraska to visit relatives. It’s a good time to leave Arizona because it’s so hot you can hardly stand it!!!

I had been letting my mind remember what life had been like in the Midwest. Like the psalmist I had been remembering “what I didn’t have”. When we returned to Mpls. we stayed in our old house that my brother-in-law and sister-in-law had bought from us. Homes in the Midwest are built so much better than those in the southwest. I was lamenting how I missed the beautiful birch custom cupboards in MN and the AZ ones were veneer that chipped. I made other comparisons in my mind as well, of what was there and what I didn’t have in AZ. So you can see how the stage was being set for the upcoming experience. We went back and visited everyone and had a good time. The trip home after a vacation is always long and tiresome---especially if it is 1700 miles by car with 3 children in the back seat.

Before we returned to AZ we had been notified that our swimming pool motor had broken down and also the compressor on our air conditioner. Even knowing that, did not prepare me for what we found when we opened the door. It was over 100 degrees in the house---the plants were almost dead, there were dead fish floating in the aquarium, the candles were melting and drooping over. Now that was only the beginning, there was swimming pool acid spilled on our kitchen carpeting from the patio door to the garage door (right across the middle of the family room), swimming pool acid had been spilled on the shelf right outside the kitchen window (permanent brown spot right in front of view from the kitchen sink), and the dog had been allowed to run loose and had scratched big claw marks down the door leading to the garage. The girl we had staying in our house while we were gone had just become a Christian in our home Bible study group.

Even though I had complained about things in this house, it was still our home and I knew God had picked out this particular house in this neighborhood for us. But why was He allowing it to almost be destroyed when we were away? Needless to say, I was devastated!!!!!! I dissolved into torrents of tears and walked from room to room surveying the destruction. Oh, by the way, the swimming pool was an ugly brown color and would need to be emptied and be resurfaced. Another expense on top of the other costly repairs. The next day was the first day of school for the kids and we couldn’t even stay in our own house, but had to stay with friends that night.

The next morning we got the kids off to school and Bob off to work and there I was wallowing in “self pity”, crying out to God, “Where are you?” “Why did you let this happen?” Why are you destroying me and my house?” God was silent to my ranting. I was miserable and wondered how long I could go on like that. After having lunch with a couple of my neighbors who were in our Bible study and not setting a very good example of a godly woman, I came home to do business with God.

I realized I needed to humbly come before God and seek His forgiveness for my attitude and actions. Like the psalmists, I had to remember who God is and focus on that and not the circumstances around me. Even if everything was destroyed, God would still be my God and I would put my hope in Him.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

After pouring my heart out to God and accepting the situation, I decided I better see what could be done about the destruction. I got out my scissors and proceeded to fix the burned spots in the kitchen carpet. Luckily it had a pattern which helped hide the damage. Our woodwork was very dark, so with the help of Old English scratch remover and a dark crayon; the dog scratches were not too noticeable. I threw out the dead plants, fish, and candles. The acid stain remained on the counter as a reminder to me of focusing on what has eternal value.

When we are experiencing a time of spiritual depression or dryness we need to go to God's Word --- even if we don't feel like it. Read Psalms or other passages that have brought you encouragement before. Maybe music ministers to you when your spirit needs lifting. The hymns and some of the choruses we have now are Scripture put to Music. There is nothing that comforts us like God's Word.

God has promised in His word (Isaiah 55:11) that “it (God's Word) will not return empty,.....but will achieve the purpose for which He sent it.” I hope you are marking your Bibles. The verses you mark will be used by God to bless and encourage you at some later time. I have places in my Bible that have six or more dates beside them, and every time I read them I am blessed again.

A book I have found very helpful to me is *Praying God's Word*, by Beth Moore. It is divided into categories and is all Scripture verses turned into prayers. Here is a sample:

“You, Lord, are close to the brokenhearted and save those who are crushed in spirit. (Ps 34:18) You are surely close to me, Lord. Help me to sense Your presence in my life. I need You more than I need the next breath.”

“My soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of Your great love I am not consumed, for Your compassions never fail, They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness! (Lam. 3:21-23)

“You, O God, will never leave me. Never will You forsake me. (Heb 13:5) You are the only absolute guarantee I have in all of life. Help me cling to the one thing I can never lose.”

We have this book in the Christos Bookcenter. Laurie tells me that there are also a set of cards from this book with prayer verses on them. I have found great blessing and encouragement in praying God's Word.

Psalm 43 ends with the psalmist once again reminding himself not to be downcast--disturbed in his spirit, but to “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Personal Application - What is God calling you to remember about His faithfulness to encourage you in your present circumstances today?

Psalm 77:11-12 - I will remember the deed of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.

Remembering God's faithfulness gives us hope and encouragement.

TRUSTING GOD - 43:1-5 --- The Third Stage

The psalm writer is changing his tone in psalm 43. He recognizes that God is his stronghold in vs 2 and is asking again as in 42:9 "Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" God is the "Rock" of his salvation in 42:9. He begins to trust God and have confidence that he will be rescued from this ungodly nation and his despair would soon be replaced by joy. He no longer focused on himself and his disappointments or his circumstances, but on the Lord his God, and that made all the difference. He is looking forward to the future when he will once again go to the altar of God and worship.

Psalm 43:4 - Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.

He finishes the psalm with the same refrain repeated twice before in psalm 42 but this time we can almost hear him say the words with joy.

Psalm 43:5 - Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Now, what can we learn from these three stages the psalmist has gone through---longing for God, remembering God, and trusting God---that we can apply to our own lives when we are spiritually depressed or in a dry period?

1. **Recognize the truth** – Review your situation and the possible causes but do not allow yourself to give in to depression or self-pity.
2. **Act on the truth** – "Put your hope in God." Act on the truths in God's Word---even if you don't feel like it. A dear friend, Beth Bergstrom, shared her paraphrase of Isaiah 50:10 with me a few years ago and it has blessed and encouraged me many times.

*Isaiah 50:10b - Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light,
trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.*

She shortened it to---"Remember in the dark what God showed you in the light" When the way seems dark to us and God seems faraway, we need to remember what He showed us during the fruitful, productive times that were full of His light, and act in obedience to those truths.

In a recent sermon Pastor Bill Price spoke about how faith and obedience work together. He said, "Faith leads to obedience---but often obedience leads to faith in times of difficulties." When we act in obedience, and it takes every ounce of our strength and determination to do so, our faith will grow.

3. **Remember the truth** ----Trust in God and what He has done. Focus on God and His character----Who He is --- He never changes. His purposes for me have not changed, Jeremiah 29:11 – *I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and give you a hope and a future.* He will continue to lead me to uplifting experiences as He has in the past. (It might be helpful to you to jot down a few of God's past blessings and guidance in your life, to refresh your memory so you can confidently join with the psalmist, "I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God") If you have a prayer journal, go back and review all your prayers that were answered.

So we see the cure for spiritual depression and dryness is God, turning to Him and letting Him minister to us. In the New Testament Jesus says:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.....and streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37-38)

If you seek to quench your thirst with anything or anyone else, your soul will languish and your spirit will dry up like a desert. Only God can satisfy our inner longing.

The desert to the ordinary observer can seem barren and even ugly. Much of the time the landscape is very brown and not much green foliage like we are used to. However, the desert has great potential. There are wild flower seeds that can lie dormant in the ground for years, but with the right amount of rain at the right times can blossom forth making a carpet of gold and purple in the spring. Six years ago when we went to Arizona for the winter months we experienced this glorious beauty. The countryside was filled with desert daisies for miles and miles. WE haven't seen this phenomenon since. The rains have to come at the right time. The seeds are all there just waiting to spring forth and bloom.

Our lives can seem like the desert, barren, dry and empty. There is great potential there--the seeds of our faith are there waiting for the "living water" of God's Word to bring forth life.

God's promises in Isaiah 41:18 - *I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.*

Isaiah 35:1-2 - The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

Personal Application ---Will you use these 3 steps in your life when you feel barren and dry?

- Recognize the truth
- Act on the truth
- Remember the truth

And will you accept Jesus' invitation to fill you with streams of living water?

Living water permeating our lives will make our desert come alive.