

## ***How to Pray When We Are Down***

Psalm 42-43

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Way back in the 70's I met a young blind man who worked as a rehabilitation therapist in New Jersey. For a while his wife was my boss in campus ministry. His name was Ken Medema, and he would play the piano and sing with such passion at our retreats that everybody was shaken. Later he became a pretty well-known recording artist who in his live performances could take words from the audience and weave them into a song on the spot. When I was thinking this week about how we pray in stormy weather, I thought about one of his songs from the 70's:

*If this is not a place where tears are understood,  
where can I go to cry?  
If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing,  
where can I go to fly?  
I don't need another place for trying to impress you  
with just how good and virtuous I am.  
I don't need another place for always being on top of things,  
ev'rybody knows that it's a sham.  
I don't need another place for always wearing smiles,  
even when it's not the way I feel.  
I don't need another place to mouth the same old platitudes,  
'Cause you and I both know that it's not real.  
If this is not a place where my questions can be asked  
where can I go to seek?  
If this is not a place where my heart cries can be heard  
where can I go to speak?*

The good news is that this is such a place. The church is not a place for pretending; it is a place for being real, and encountering what is real within us and what is real beyond us. Nothing reminds us of that more clearly than trying to pray out loud the words of the psalms. The psalms are full of stormy weather. They are full of complaints against God, sometimes hand in hand as in this one with hoping desperately in the reality of God. Our hymnals are almost uniformly made up of happy songs, with a few songs of love and longing. But the book of Psalms, the hymnal of Israel, is almost half sad songs. They sang those sad songs in the context of worship. The "sons of Korah" who wrote these words were worship leaders in the temple, and they are leading a congregation in singing "Why am I discouraged?" and "Why have you forsaken me?" They would probably be fired by most churches. We can't bear very much reality.

Psalm 42-3 starts with the simile of a deer panting for water. This is not a Block Island deer with plenty to eat and drink. This is a deer in the deserts of Palestine, in a land where water is scarce. This deer is desperate and her life depends on finding a stream. That's the way I am in relation to you, God. I am thirsty for God but I cannot find you.

This song was probably written when the singer could not get to Jerusalem and the temple, perhaps during the exile in Babylon. But it's not really about that. It's about this feeling of discouragement and bringing it into God's presence by expressing it in prayer.

This song tells us that it's OK to talk in church—and OK to talk to God—about being depressed. I'm not a person who struggles with depression, but I grew up around it. When I was twelve I traveled from Japan to the States to be reunited with my mother who had been in a padded cell in a mental hospital. When I was 21, just graduated from college, two days before I was to leave for a summer in Japan, we got a call that my mother had a gun at her graduate school. She had left a note in her dorm room: "Have a private burial tomorrow. I don't want to make Stephen late for his trip." Some of you have been at that point in your own lives and have lived to tell the tale. Tell it.

Not long ago I gave Lisa Starr a copy of a book by the poet Anne Sexton called *The Awful Rowing toward God*, about her own struggle with depression and faith. A poem called "The Sickness unto Death" begins:

*God went out of me*

*as if the sea dried up like sandpaper,  
as if the sun became a latrine.  
God went out of my fingers.  
They became stone.  
My body became a side of mutton  
and despair roamed the slaughterhouse.*

*Somebody brought me oranges in my despair  
but I could not eat a one  
for God was in that orange.  
I could not touch what did not belong to me.  
The priest came,  
he said God was even in Hitler.  
I did not believe him  
for if God were in Hitler  
then God would be in me.  
I did not hear the bird sounds.  
They had left.  
I did not see the speechless clouds,  
I saw only the little white dish of my faith  
breaking in the crater.*

I think our singer in Psalm 42-3 is in that same place. I am desperately thirsty for God, but I am dried out and God is not there. All I have to drink is my own tears. Things are going badly for me and my enemies taunt me by asking “So where is your God now?” And I hate their taunts even more because I do not have an answer. I have no idea where God is. I remember the good times when I was in a crowd of worshipers and full of joy. But today that memory makes my heart break.

Can I remind you that this is in the Bible? Do we believe that these words are inspired by the Holy Spirit? Why would God give us models like this for our prayers? I think it’s because the first mistake we make when we are depressed is that we think we cannot pray. We can’t get an emotional feeling of connection, so we don’t say anything. But God says to us in the Psalms that this is a place where tears are understood.

In verse 5 we come to that refrain that is repeated three times in this song. A traditional translation is “Why are you cast down within me, o my soul?” Why discouraged, why sad? In one sense we know the answer to that question—I feel cut off from God, my enemies are oppressing me. But we ask ourselves: why can’t I deal with this? So there are two questions, really. First, God, why are you letting this happen to me? Second, why am I letting this get me depressed? We blame not only God but ourselves. The depressed person believes—as we sometimes tell him—that the depression is his own fault. That’s not true, but he believes it.

The refrain goes on to make a kind of resolution. Note to self: put your hope in God. Remind yourself that in spite of what is going on, in spite of appearances, God is faithful. God is loving. Hope in God to win in the end even if the enemies appear to be winning now. The psalmist says “I will praise him again.” That is, I can’t praise him now, I can’t praise him where I am now, but I can still hope in God that God will bring me to a place where I *can* praise him. This depression will not last forever. Someday I will praise God again because he will save me from this. It’s hard to remember that when you’re in a black hole, but it is still true that God is your Savior.

There is a kind of decision in that refrain that comes three times. Yes, I am depressed and in turmoil, but I am going to try to put my hope in God, believing that he will not leave me in this place forever. When John Bunyan was thrown in prison for preaching as an early Baptist, he would say to his soul, “O my soul, this is not the place of despair, this is not the time to despair in. As long as mine eyes can find a promise in the Bible, as long as there is a moment left me of breath or life in this world, so long will I wait or look for mercy, so long will I fight against unbelief and despair.”

In the second stanza of this song, we are back to sadness. In the first there was a drought of God, and now there is a flood. God seems to be bringing bad things down on me and his waves of misfortune are washing over me. I feel like I am drowning. I feel like I have been forsaken in the dark.

But in the middle of this there is a glimmer of light. I’m not sure if the singer decided to add the verse later, but right in the middle of the three stanzas, at the exact middle there is an extra line that doesn’t fit the symmetry of the three stanzas. It’s verse 8. It says “Through each day the Lord pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to the God who gives me life.” All this bad stuff is pouring down on me, but if I think about it I know that God is also pouring out his unfailing love—that *hesed* we have talked about the last two

weeks, that steadfast love, covenant love. It is still true that God loves me in the midst of this, even if I can't feel it. I get through the night by singing his songs. Those songs are a kind of prayer to the God who gave me life to start with and will give me my life back.

We might wish the song would pivot there and turn into a happy song, but the psalmist's situation has not really changed yet. The third stanza is as sad as the first. God, you are my refuge, but I feel like you've kicked me out! The New Living Translation says "Why have you tossed me aside?" Is it wrong to ask questions like that? We are followers of Jesus who cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Is it wrong for us to cry out the same thing? The great theologian Archie Bunker had a thing or two to say about that. Edith told him not to holler at God, and Archie replied, "See Edith, Job hollered at God and, if memory serves, he got a promotion from that there and even a nice write-up in the Bible." For once, Archie was right.

The psalm ends, of course, with that refrain and that resolution to put my hope in God. Hope—not just wishful thinking, but confidence that God will turn out to be God and true to his nature. Confidence that this cannot be the end because we know what God is really like. We have his promises but most importantly we have Jesus. Jesus embodied what the psalms talked about, that God is near the brokenhearted, and Jesus showed us that God ultimately triumphs over our own doubts and the worst that the world can throw at us, even death. It's a wonderful thing that the motto of our state is that one word "Hope" portrayed as an anchor, just as it is in our stained glass window. It comes from Hebrews 6:19, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

I think there are some things about God that we cannot learn except in the dark, and one of those things may be hope.

One of my Baptist preacher heroes is Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York when it was built. He was one of the most popular and influential preachers of his day. But when he was a student a few blocks away from that church at Columbia and Union Seminary, Fosdick went through what they used to call a nervous breakdown. He attempted suicide and was placed in a mental hospital for months. It was two years before he made it back to school and he carried the scars of that experience. But many years later Fosdick wrote:

*This whole horrid experience was one of the most important factors in my preparation for the ministry. For the first time in my life, I faced, at my wit's end, a situation too much for me to handle. I went down into the depths where self-confidence becomes ludicrous. There that technique I had habitually relied upon—marshalling my wit and my volition and going strenuously after what I wanted—petered out completely. The harder I struggled, the worse I was. It was what I did the struggling with that was sick. I, who had thought myself strong, found myself beaten, unable to cope not only with outward circumstances but even with myself. In that experience I learned some things about religion that theological seminaries do not teach. I learned to pray, not because I had adequately argued out prayer's rationality, but because I desperately needed help from a Power greater than my own. I learned that God, much more than a theological proposition, is an immediately available Resource [For the Living of These Days, Harper & Row, 1956, p. 74].*

Near the end of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Christian and his friend Hopeful have to cross the river of death. There is no way to avoid those deep waters. Christian begins to sink, and he cries out to his friend, quoting the psalms, "I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head, all his waves go over me." But Hopeful says to his friend, "Be of good cheer, my brother, I feel the bottom and it is good." That's the witness we give to one another: I've felt the bottom. It doesn't go down forever. I've hit bottom and come back up. And that is the witness the Bible gives to us over and over. The one who felt God was far away and had rejected him was able to write this psalm, and the God he eventually found even took that song and made it part of the Bible for us to sing. Put your hope in God, for you will yet praise him, your Savior and your God.