

Depressed – Put Your Hope in God

Psalm 43 from the series, “Little Psalms for Big Problems”

Message from the Master Broadcast January 27, 2008 by Pastor Daron Lindemann

It’s the dead of winter here in Wisconsin. Our winter started early this year with a heavy-hitting snow storm on the first day of December and we’ll likely see snow through March perhaps into April. Night begins in the afternoon because the sun sets so early, and even the sun doesn’t like getting out of bed in the winter, grudgingly rising each morning after most people are already out of bed. It can be a depressing time of the year even for people who grew up here and are used to it. But there is hope. The dismal winter doldrums need not consume us northerners so much that we turn into grumpy grinchies, irritably impatient with people and quick to complain about our lot in life. There’s more to life in Wisconsin than slush in your shoes and ice dams building up under the shingles on your roof. There is spring time when the grass warms into its bright green hue and the colorful tulips and daffodils give way to blossoming cherry trees and then aromatic lilacs and honeysuckles, calling us out of our hibernation. Then comes summer, a comfortable summer offering plenty of sunshine, abundant lakes and rivers for fun and sport, all with typically moderate temperatures that allow anyone to take full advantage of the sun. And if you can’t wait for the arrival of June and July, you just have to escape the cold right now, then point your car in the direction of Wisconsin Dells to enjoy a weekend at an indoor waterpark or a condo in Door County overlooking the lake with a fireplace and Jacuzzi to keep you warm or a few days of pampering at a spa in Kohler complete with sauna and steam bath. Bottom line: our circumstances don’t rule us as much as we think they do.

That’s the big problem that surfaces in today’s little Psalm. I call it “depression.” Whether it’s your personal sickness as someone clinically diagnosed with this disorder by a doctor, or whether it’s an occasional sadness in your life opening a window to an inner hopelessness, depression is a big problem. It monopolizes a person’s thinking and slyly spreads its tentacles out and around any area of joy in life as it takes control of circumstances to convince a person there is no hope. Within our little Psalm 43, however, we find help and hope for depression that begins with God. This is yet another reminder that God’s Word, including the Psalms we study in this series, all plugs into our lives with such relevance. People looking for real-life guidance find it right here in the Psalms. Christian author, Philip Yancey, writes about the Psalms, “The psalms are not pious devotionals. They are filled with accounts of enemies who scheme and gossip and plot violence. For the psalmists, faith in God involved a constant struggle against powerful forces that often seemed more real than God. The writers frequently asked, ‘Where are you, God? Why don’t you help me?’ They often felt abandoned, misused, and betrayed” (Philip Yancey, “Discovering God: A Devotional Journey Through the Bible, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993, p. 58).

Sounds like our lives, our faith, and our times of depression too. Even as Christians it’s possible – dare I say likely – that we will be depressed in some way. So God gives us help and hope today in Psalm 43. Our dismal circumstances don’t rule us as much as we think they do.

Psalm 43 reads as a close companion to Psalm 42, within a section of Psalms written by the Sons of Korah, a group of Levites whom King David had placed in charge of music in the temple. Their contribution to temple worship in the form of Psalms like this provides material for our worship life today – both publicly on Sundays and privately in our devotions. Psalms 42 and 43 thematically display a longing on the part of the Sons of Korah, separated from the temple in Jerusalem, to be back at the temple worshipping God. Their circumstances prevent them from doing so, so the psalmist shares his inner struggle and ultimate faith with us, concluding that there is help and hope in God. He begins by sharing a complaint and identifying the circumstances that are troubling him. *“Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men.”* The people around him don’t sound too supportive. He refers to his nation as ungodly and the people with whom he interacts and deceitful and wicked. He wants God to plead his cause, a cause that is assuredly more righteous than any of those other people, and he actually asks God to rescue him from them. He’s trapped in relationships and can’t get out. Ever felt that way? Trapped by people who aren’t behaving in a way that’s helpful to you, but there isn’t much you can do about it? To make matters worse, the psalmist remarks, *“You are God my stronghold,”* as if he’s found what he needs but immediately follows it up by asking, *“Why have you rejected me?”* His relationship with God is out of control, too. He knows that God can provide a safe and secure place, but feels like God has abandoned him. He’d be okay if he could only find God. And that makes matters worse. *“Why must I go about mourning?”* he cries in pain, confused, lost, and hopeless.

One particular variety of clinically diagnosed depression is called Seasonal Affective Disorder. It’s also called winter depression because it’s seasonal and temporarily affects a person who experiences normal mental and emotional health during the rest of the year. One of the treatments for Seasonal Affective Disorder is light therapy. Specially designed lamps emitting light (brighter than the normal synthetic light you’d find in living room lamps or even overhead office lighting) are placed near the person who suffers from the disorder to alleviate the depression. A specific type of light therapy, dawn simulation, has proven to be very effective as it depicts a bright, warm sunrise. No wonder the psalmist, seemingly controlled by his hopeless circumstances, prays to God, *“Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me.”* Here is the best light therapy you can find. The star of Bethlehem guides anyone caught in uncontrollable circumstances to the manger where heaven’s light beams brightly on this earth in the Christ child. This Savior comes not to stand above our circumstances and philosophize about how we should do a better job handling them, but he comes to be part of our circumstances, to experience them, and from within them to cry with us, hurt with us, feel the burden of our guilt, even die. His light is not a synthetic light that only pretends to be the sun. He is the Sun of Righteousness, the Son of God, the child born for us. His light is as real as his love.

Better yet, his truth which guides us is wrapped up in the best dawn of all: Easter dawn. On that morning he changed truth. He broke the tomb of death and the curse of sin. He shackles Satan’s dominion forever. Nothing can change that. You can be trapped in the worst of circumstances but it isn’t powerful enough to change history, to change that Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead. There he conquered your fears. There he stepped onto the throne of the universe to rule all things for your good. There he established the truth that will never change: in God there is hope, there is renewal, there is life now and forever!

Now the psalmist realizes his hope, his certainty. Now the psalmist sees past any depressing thoughts, any suffocating circumstances. By looking to God in faith, by trusting in God's Word, the psalmist experiences a change – not in his circumstances necessarily, but definitely in his heart – and goes beyond relief to rejoicing in God's light and truth. *“Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.”* The psalmist realizes that the place where he'll find refuge and joy is not a place he defines by choosing the best set of circumstance for his life. Do that and you're playing God. Demand that troubles leave you alone and that each day greets you with a smile and warm cup of coffee and health and wealth and you'll live in an ocean of despair and depression every day. No, repent of playing God and let God be God. Look for relief not in your mind but in your heart, for there God is. Look for help and hope not in your plans for the future but in God's promises that always find their fulfillment when received in faith. God's holy mountain. The place where God dwells. The altar of God. These are the joy and delight of the psalmist and yours too.

The psalmist concludes, *“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 self-talk is a helpful activity, call it a therapy if you want, when feelings of depression overwhelm us. Instead of letting depression spread its tentacles we say, “Wait a minute, here. How does the life of a Christian really work? Why am I feeling this way when I have a great God and Savior who has promised me this, who gives me hope and help, who is my Savior and my God?” With that, we don't let our fears tell us what to do but we tell them the way things will work from now on. Rescued from our fears, we enjoy freedom to thank and praise God with the skills, time, resources, and money he gives us. We let it all out in bursts of joy because we can't help it. We have found where there is hope. There is hope in God. Amen.