

Prayer and God's Covenant Love

Psalm 42 & 43

People respond in different ways when they're frustrated or disappointed with another person. Some people go directly to the other person in order to talk things out. Perhaps you've misunderstood what's been said or done (in which case you can be straightened out); or perhaps the other person will admit that s/he was wrong and will apologize. Either way, some people are good about going directly to the other person to resolve things.

Others of us don't go directly to the person who's offended or disappointed us. We talk *about* them to others; we replay offenses in our minds rehearsing what we might say to the person if there's ever a showdown; but we don't go directly to the other person. The result is often bitterness and lots of unresolved relationships.

I think we'd all say that the first response is ultimately best (not easiest, but best). Unless you talk directly to the other person things will never be put right. This morning I want us to consider that something similar is true in our relationship with God. When we're disappointed with God we should go directly to Him to talk it out.

There *are* times when we are frustrated or disappointed with God. In his book *Disappointment with God* Philip Yancey talks about the three broad categories of disappointment with God.

- Sometimes God seems unfair. I sometimes talk with people who are honestly trying to honor God, but they never seem to get a break; they experience great turmoil and suffering. Others, however, who don't even want God have a rather comfortable life. God seems unfair.
- God seems silent. Perhaps you've been seeking God and asking for direction on some issue, but you hear nothing. When you pray it just seems like you're talking to yourself. God can seem very silent at times.
- God seems hidden. There are times when all we want is for God show up in some tangible, unambiguous way – through a sign or a permanent healing or a voice or a bright light, anything. But God seems hidden.

Yancey points out that “true atheists do not . . . feel disappointed in God. They expect nothing and receive nothing. But those who commit their lives to God no matter what instinctively expect something in return” (*Disappointment with God*, p. 37).

Today we are going to consider Psalm 42 and 43 – psalms that gives us permission to go directly to God and talk things out when we're disappointed with Him. These psalms are classic examples of psalms of lament in which people pour out their complaints to God very directly and very boldly. People throughout Scripture cared about their relationship with God so much that it wasn't enough merely to talk to others *about* God or to leave things unresolved (a recipe for bitterness and despair). They went directly to God.

Turn with me to Psalm 42. We'll see how the character of God – specifically His lovingkindness (covenant love) – fueled the psalmist's lament. We'll also notice that the psalmist talks both to God *and* to himself.

Psalm 42 and 43: A Case Study in Expressing our Complaints to God. Notice in verses 1 and 2 how the psalmist describes his spiritual thirst:

42:1 As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?

He likens himself to a deer trying to find water. He is parched spiritually. He had a thirst for God that nothing else would satisfy. The problem was that his spiritual thirst went unquenched. Like a deer that found dry creek beds and dried-up ponds, the psalmist wasn't finding any relief. It's good to thirst after God, but if that thirst isn't quenched, it can be demoralizing. That's because the Scriptures themselves create the expectation that if we thirst after God, we'll find Him to be satisfying. Psalm 34:8 tells us, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" Jesus once stood up at a festival in Jerusalem and announced, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scriptures said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37ff). It can be unsettling to hear these promises and not experience the refreshing presence of God. We wonder, "Is there something wrong with me or my faith? Or worse, is there something wrong with God?"

It turns out that the psalmist *did* find water, but it was his own tears:

3 My tears have been my food day and night,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
4 These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Most likely the psalmist is in exile, and his enemies are taunting him with the question, "Where is your God?" In the psalmist's day, when one nation defeated another nation in battle, it meant that that nation's god was the most powerful. It looked like the God of Israel was weak and/or disinterested in the condition of His people. When the psalmist remembered these things, his soul was in turmoil. He thought back to the days when he used to lead worship in Jerusalem. He remembered the procession to the temple, the shouts of joy and thanksgiving, and the multitude of people at the festival. And he longed to experience that again.

Maybe you can think of a time in the past when you experienced God in some amazing ways. Perhaps it was right after you came to Christ and everything was fresh and new and exciting. Or perhaps you were involved in some type of ministry or outreach that filled you with anticipation and joy. Serving God was the most satisfying thing you could imagine. But now . . . things aren't so exciting. And it's troubling to you that your experience is so much less joyful and fulfilling. This is the type of thing we should talk with God about.

I have to warn you that lamenting can be rather difficult and strenuous. It's a lot easier to gripe and complain to other people. It's a lot easier to numb your pain through _____

(alcohol, fantasy, busyness, TV, sports, news, etc.). Lamenting requires us to articulate what is happening in our souls – which can be agonizing. But that’s what the psalmist did in verse 6: “O my God, my soul is in despair within me. . .” He basically says, “God, I am dying on the inside. Instead of being full of joy and hope and peace, I am in despair.”

We don’t have time to examine all of Psalm 42 and 43 in detail, but let’s notice a couple of the other complaints/laments in these psalms. Down in verses 9 and 10 we read:

9 I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"
10 As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

Listen to the first couple of verses of Psalm 43:

1 Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation;
O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!
2 For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

You might not feel comfortable being that bold and direct with God. You may think you have no right to bring such accusations to God. But I agree with Yancey when he says that those who take God seriously address God with this type of raw honesty. I talked to someone recently who said, “God, really? Couldn’t you protect us better than that? I specifically asked You not to let this happen but it did anyway!” That type of praying is reflected throughout Scripture.

So far in Psalm 42 the psalmist has been talking to God. But in verse 5 he talks to himself. This is the refrain that we also find in verse 11 and in 43:5. For that reason scholars generally agree that Psalm 42 and 43 should be taken as one unit. When you have sixteen verses and three of them are almost identical, you have a strong literary clue as to what the author is doing: he is emphasizing the necessity of talking to yourself *as* you bring your complaints before God.

5 Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him
For the help of His presence.

The psalmist confronts and questions his own soul. Listen to how Martyn-Lloyd Jones summarizes the approach of the psalmist. When he uses the term depression he isn’t necessarily using clinical terminology.

The main trouble in this whole matter of depression is that we allow our self to talk to us, instead of talking to our self. . . Now this man’s treatment [i.e., the author of Psalm 42] was this; instead of allowing himself to talk to him, he started talking to himself. “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him, so he stands up and says, Soul, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. (*Spiritual Depression*, pp. 20-21)

That's just what the psalmist did. He probes and questions himself. On the one hand he has good reason to despair and to be troubled; he's not where he wanted to be geographically or spiritually. On the other hand, he does what we often fail to do: he preaches to himself and tells himself what he needs to do. "Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence." He tells himself to hope in God. Here hope is virtually synonymous with trust. When we hope in God we trust that He will be faithful in the future.

The reason he can hope/trust in God is because He knew God's character. Even though he wasn't experiencing God's presence or protection the way he wanted, he knew that God was compassionate toward His people. His lovingkindness – His covenant love – couldn't be extinguished. The psalmist tells himself that there will be a day in the future when he will again praise God because he has experienced the *help of His presence*. Whether or not he returns from exile, he knows that God wants him to experience the help of His presence.

Down in verse 8 the psalmist explicitly mentions God's lovingkindness:

8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime;
And His song will be with me in the night,
A prayer to the God of my life.

He knew that God would be faithful to His covenant. And so he told himself to "hope in God." If the psalmist could cling to the lovingkindness of God, how much more should we! The covenant we have with God was secured by the death and resurrection of His one and only Son. There is literally no greater assurance of God's lovingkindness than the death and resurrection of Jesus. When God seems unfair or silent or hidden, we can remember that God has proven that He is more compassionate toward us than we can imagine. And so we tell ourselves, "Why are you in despair and why have you become troubled within me, O my soul? Hope in God for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence."

In summary, this psalm suggests two things:

Because of the lovingkindness of God, we have permission to lament/complain.

When was the last time you poured out your complaints before God? Instead of talking to others about God or instead of merely thinking about God and how unfair He's been, try an actual lament. You may not be in the habit of being that honest or that direct, but it could be healing to your soul. You may not have any great disappointments or frustrations with God right now, but keep this category of "lament" in mind for the future.

Having said that, I think that *two qualifications* are in order. First, the psalms make clear that *as we lament we had best "delight in the Law of the Lord."* Psalm 1 sets the context of the rest of the book of Psalms. It talks about the blessing of delighting in the Law of the Lord – taking such great satisfaction in everything God says that we saturate our hearts and minds with His Word.

Those who do so will be like trees firmly planted by streams of water: they won't wither when the "heat" comes; they bear fruit in the midst of drought. Those who don't delight in God's truth end up "walking in the counsel of the wicked" or "standing in the path of sinners" or "sitting in the seat of scoffers." That person is in a bad position to lament. The scoffer who laments only becomes more bitter and hardened.

But when we saturate our minds and hearts with the Word, our laments are informed and refined by God's truth. That's what we see happening in the psalms. As Lowell talked about last week, we pray in light of God's promises and God's character, not merely our own wants and desires.

Second, *after we lament we may need to come back to God, fall on our faces, and admit that we've been arrogant and/or ignorant in the way we've talked to Him.* This is one of the lessons that Job learned. Job laid out his complaint before the Lord very boldly and directly. But then God responds with 70+ rhetorical questions that made it clear that Job wasn't in any position to critique God Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth. In Job 42:3 and 6 we read that Job had to come back to God and confess:

3 . . . I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

6 Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes."

God doesn't accept all of our accusations and insinuations. But if such sentiments fill our hearts, it is better to express them to God honestly. They need to be dealt with so that they don't poison our souls. If you have bottled up complaints and disappointments with God, the place to begin is with soul-searching honesty before God. Schedule some time to get alone with God and be honest. Get everything out on the table so that God can do a work in your life – and possibly in your circumstances. If you cross a line in what you've said to God, fall on your face and admit as much. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, we don't need to fear repentance. It is a gift from God that allows us to get back on track in our relationship with Him.

Because of the lovingkindness of God, we have hope to pray. This is where we talk to ourselves and tell ourselves to hope in God. I'm impressed that the psalmist actually took the risk of praying and asking God to intervene in his circumstances. It's a lot safer sometimes not to expect much from God. But that's a small, poor way to live our lives. It's much better to take the risk and ask God to act. Because of the lovingkindness of God, we can and should do this.

Paul actually wrote in Romans 8 that since God didn't spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? That "all things" doesn't mean everything that we want or think we need; it means all things that we need to honor Him and do His will. That's really the point of our lamenting. We aren't lamenting because our lives are difficult; we're lamenting because we aren't experiencing God in the midst of our difficulties. But because of His lovingkindness we can hope in God and ask Him to act.