

The Bible Under the Circumstances

Psalms 42 and 43

1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

3 My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” 4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

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. 7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of the waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

8 By day the Lord directs His love, at night His song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” 10 My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise Him, my savior and my God.

43 1 Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. 2 You are my God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? 3 Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. 4 Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

Faith is often believing without seeing, and occasionally believing without feeling.

“I’ve been pondering how life can just be too much sometimes.”

That was the opening sentence of a blog post way back in September of 2021, by Marlo Schalesky, founder of a California charitable organization that works with at-risk kids. Her post for that day was titled, “Too Much,” and Schalesky mentioned some things from the previous week, including some very depressing news on the global level and the surge of the Delta variant of the coronavirus that

was then spreading across America and killing people. Things weren't much better in her own community, where there was a fatal stabbing at a local high school resulting in one 17-year-old dead and 17- and 14-year-olds arrested. Elsewhere in her community, there was "a double homicide, another attempted homicide, and more." And then, on top of all that, Schalesky had to deal with life-threatening health incidents with two of her children.

"It's all too much," Schalesky said. "We were not created to bear the burdens of the world. But these days, the 24/7 news makes it possible to know all the heavy, horrible things going on in the world, to add to the burdens of community and family. It is just too much," she said. "So, I find myself emotionally battered. Weary. Burdened. Exhausted," she wrote.

Do you ever feel like that? The author of Psalms 42 and 43 did. (Bible scholars say the two psalms were originally a single poetic unit.) "My soul is cast down within me," the psalmist wrote in the sixth verse of Psalm 42, and that feeling was unrelenting, for he also said, "My tears have been my food day and night" (42:3). He also asks rhetorically, "Why must I walk about mournfully?" in verse 9. Whatever was going on — and scholars surmise that the psalmist was among those in exile in Babylon — it was all *too much*. [NOTE 1]

Psalms 42 and 43 are what we might call "hard-times texts." We might have read them before, but they have a way of jumping out at us when our circumstances are similar to those alluded to in the Scripture. Like now when we are just recovering from a world pandemic, dealing with Russia's war with Ukraine and now war breaks out between Iran and Israel.

Casey Cep, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, noticed that. Raised in a Lutheran church, she said that Sunday services were her first book club, "because week after week, very thoughtful, very loving people gathered around the same book and tried to figure out what it meant."

That book, of course, was the Bible. Cep grew up steeped in it, and she has continued to read the Bible as an adult. Now, however, something new happens as she reads it. It's because of reading the Bible while pregnant with her first child. She explained this in her essay, "Reading the Old Testament While Pregnant" in *The New Yorker*.

During her pregnancy, Cep found herself moved by the mothers in that Testament — Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Hannah, Rachel, Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, Jochebed and others — and took note of all the different experiences of pregnancy and parenting there.

These women seemed like metaphors when she previously read about them. "The matriarchs were just that: mothers of nations and peoples," Cep said, "not mothers who lived through months of actual, embodied pregnancy — the same as my mother had experienced in order to give birth to me." Now, however, Cep

cannot help but imagine them “with their growing bellies, achy backs and swollen ankles, feeling the stirring of tiny limbs as they gain strength.”

Cep recognized that her way of reading the Bible during this time — where the text’s meaning comes from one’s personal interactions with it — has its limits, and that some would argue that great works have their own objective meaning, not the subjective meaning that those who interact with them perceive.

But Cep added, “I ... know how much the [Bible] already meant to me, even as a child. Great works of art can change their meaning for us across time. Books may remain static, but we do not.” [NOTE 2]

Referring to seeing ourselves in the texts, Cep said, “What is most miraculous and meaningful in our lives is often most universal, powerful because it has happened to so many others, precious because it is happening to us.” That is one of the things that makes the Bible so great. We can see ourselves in Scripture. We can relate with the flawed Bible characters. The Bible never glosses over human weakness. Of all the leaders written about in the Bible, only a small percentage are mostly positive examples and finish strong.

Have you ever noticed that feelings are cyclical? Feelings come and go and they can be fickle. A person who lives and makes their decisions by feelings is doomed to a very up and down life. But when you see yourself in Scripture, receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are not relegated to living by your feelings but by the Word of God.

Obviously, Cep was identifying with a happier experience than the author of Psalms 42 and 43. But the principle of seeing ourselves in the biblical texts is the same. There’s a certain help that comes to us when we recognize that the pages of the Bible are populated with people not unlike us, people for whom life became “too much” long before that particular vocabulary was around. [NOTE 3]

But this is not merely a case of misery liking company. There’s also help in seeing what else the biblical writers had to say about their circumstances. For the psalmist, it’s a statement about what he sees as the way forward, and he says it three times: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (42:5, 11; 43:5).

The psalmist was drawing a measure of endurance from an understanding that not only do troubles come and go, but also our *feelings* about our life tend to cycle. Some days, it all seems like too much. But other days, with no change in circumstances, one may feel less overwhelmed. The psalmist relied on the memory of how hope in God had buoyed him in the past, and declared “for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” ... maybe not right at that moment, but eventually, so don’t give up.

Many of us need to remember that the Bible is a library, not a book, and as a library it speaks with multiple voices on as personal a topic as prayer? And what if

understanding ... different and often overlooked biblical patterns for prayer in a crisis would not only ease the guilt, but accelerate our connection with God?

Read the “how long?” prayers of Psalm 13, 44 and 88. You’ll be shocked at the nerve people have with God, as the psalm writers have the freedom not only to vent their anger at God but to question his job performance. What will that teach us about God? Well, as a church that believes the Bible really is “inspired, eternal, and true,” we get the revelation that our God is so emotionally secure that He will inspire a Scripture that second guesses him. God can take it. And if you ask in the middle of quarantine, “How long, O Lord?” he will not reject your emotion; he will honor your authenticity. ...

The “lament” prayer of Psalm 22. The Bible is full of people who lament their loss; my goodness, there is even an entire book called Lamentations! As you check out Psalm 22, you’ll hear familiar language, and you’ll understand how Jesus saw his experience on the cross through the lens of these words penned hundreds of years earlier. If Jesus was free to lament to his Father, so are you.

I am so glad the biblical library contains material suitable for every emotion and every situation — including one that none of us have seen before. —Talbot Davis, “Top Five Biblical Patterns for Prayer in a Pandemic,” *Ministry Matters*, April 16, 2020.

There are difficult times in everyone’s life. Nobody gets through life unscathed, untouched by difficulty, sorrow, loss, and hard times. That’s why Jesus said to His disciples, “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world,” as recorded in the gospel of John chapter 16 and verse 33. So there will be times in life that it is good for us to lament. To lament simply means to express grief or sorrow. One of my friends wrote on Facebook this past week, “Apparently the theme of “The Voice 2023” is “You can’t be a good singer unless you’ve experienced some tragedy in your life.” I commented that it is easier to connect to a song emotionally if you share the emotion of the song. I have written about 20 songs, only two of them that aren’t about something sad or difficult are any good. I think my best songs were written out of deep emotion. So it is good to express how you are feeling in a healthy way. Blues singer Ma Rainey wrote about the blues: “They hear it come out, but they don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life. It helps you to deal with life when you express your feelings in a healthy way.

A different way to think of this is to think of Lament (expressing feeling of grief and sorrow) as proof of a relationship. Israel brought their lament to God in the psalms on the basis of his covenant with them. These prayers and songs were not vain attempts to convince a distant deity to notice them. They were not like the priests of Baal dancing and cutting themselves to conjure a response. These were a people whom YHWH — the sole sovereign creator — had called his “firstborn”. They were asking their Father to act accordingly.

On a Saturday morning, when my wife and I are trying to sleep in until that luxurious hour of 8 a.m. but our younger children are hungry for breakfast, they don't run outside to the neighbor begging for food. They come boldly into our bedroom asking for what they need. "Will you please make me some eggs?!" We are tempted in those moments to get upset, but we should be honored by their request. It is in itself proof of our relationship with them.

The reverse of this scene is tragically described by Dr. Russell Moore in his book, *Adopted for Life*. Moore describes going to an orphanage in Russia as they were in the process of pursuing adoption. The silence from the nursery was eerie. The babies in the cribs never cried. Not because they never needed anything, but because they had learned that no one cared enough to answer. Children who are confident of the love of a caregiver cry. For the Christian, our lament, when taken to our Father in heaven, is proof of our relationship with God, our connection to a great Caregiver. ...

Lament is not our final prayer. It is a prayer *in the meantime*. Most of the lament psalms end with a "vow to praise" — a promise to return thanksgiving to God for his deliverance. Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, we know that sorrow is not how the story ends. The song may be in a minor key right now, but one day it will resolve in a beautiful and joyous major chord. When every tear is wiped away, when death is swallowed up in victory, when heaven and earth are made new and joined as one, when the saints rise in glorious bodies ... then we will sing at last a great, "Hallelujah!" For now, we lift our lament to God as we wait with hope. *Even so, come, Lord Jesus.* —Glenn Packiam, "Five Things to Know About Lament."

[NOTE 4] The biblical book of Lamentations is also a hard-times text, as the name of the book affirms. It describes the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, and all the suffering and agony that went with it. The book is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, often called the "the weeping prophet." Listen to how he describes his mood: "I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all — oh, how well I remember — the feeling of hitting the bottom." But then comes a longer view: "But there's one other thing I remember, and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning" (Lamentations 3:19-23, *The Message*).

It would be easy to dismiss these biblical perspectives when one is confronted by life that is "too much." They sound a little too long-range for our sunken present mood. We want solutions and relief *now*.

But when we are in the pits, the Scripture can speak to us in fresh ways because a lot of it was written in the pits of life. Stan Purdum tells of a young truck driver in a congregation he pastored who had a terminal diagnosis. Shortly before becoming sick, Joe had married, become a father and purchased a semi-truck,

intending to become an owner-operator. But then came that ugly word “cancer,” and he was eventually reduced to spending his days in bed, sometimes with his baby girl playing on the bed beside him, as he awaited the end of his life.

[NOTE 5] Stan visited him often, and on one of those visits, Joe mentioned that some Scripture he had read that morning especially spoke to him and helped him. Stan asked what the text said, and Joe described it in his own words. But Stan couldn't quite place it. Joe picked up his Bible and opened it to where he had a bookmark and showed it to Stan. It was 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, where the apostle Paul talks of our lives being like clay jars, and says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”

Seeing the passage, Stan realized that not only did he know the text, but he had preached a sermon on it a few months earlier. He later thought about why it hadn't come to mind when Joe was speaking about it. And then Stan realized that for him, the passage was merely another sermon text, but for Joe — who was afflicted, perplexed, struck down and feeling betrayed by his body — the verses were truth that reached him in his circumstances. Joe knew why his soul was cast down within him, as the psalmist put it, but in the words of the apostle he found help and hope. [NOTE 6]

The writer of Psalms 42 and 43 took note of the cyclical nature of our feelings, saying that he was cast down but adding: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

What this calls for is a certain amount of perseverance, waiting out the lows in the faith, hope and feelings cycle, believing that our outlook will change. Emotions can be like a yo-yo or a roller coaster. God calls us to faith, which not only is believing without seeing, but sometimes is also believing without feeling. The reward of that kind of faith is that we remain at the right place. When the feelings return, we are still living in God's household. We are still His kids. We know that hope in God never proves to be an illusion. It is sure! The hope of eternal life in heaven with our Savior and Lord is an anchor that holds, a mighty rock of faith in our lives. That keeps the lows from getting too low. Put your faith in Him, cast your cares on Him, that anchor holds. —Stan Purdum and Carl Wilton contributed to this material.

Sermon Notes for “The Bible Under the Circumstances” based on Psalms 42 & 43
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- I. It can be very helpful and life-giving to see ourselves in the text. “What is most miraculous and meaningful in our lives is often the most universal, powerful because it has happened to so many others, precious because it is happening to us.” (Casey Cep The New Yorker).
- II. It is helpful to realize that the Bible is full of people just like us. There were people for whom life became, “just too much”, long ago. For the psalmist, the way forward is this, “Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, My Savior and My God.”
- III. Feelings come and go just as troubles come and go. I may not feel like praising Him right now, but I know that “I shall again praise Him, my help, my God.”
- IV. “But there’s one thing I remember, and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God’s loyal love couldn’t have run out, His merciful love couldn’t have dried up. They’re created new every morning” (Lamentations 3:19-23 *The Message*)
- V. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”
- VI. So what are you going to do about it? How can we be patient and persevere? By knowing, believing, in hope that does not disappoint us. Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my hope and my God.” Please write down one thing that you will do to keep hope in view this week.