



# *Psalms*

42 – 72



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

“The book of Psalms is a divinely inspired handbook of worship—God’s ‘how-to’ book of worship. Only the operation of inspiration can explain the book’s remarkable unity in spite of its multiple authorship. The personal and sundry ways that each author expressed his feelings, fears, doubts, joys, sorrows, and desires are paradigms illustrating how God expects worshipers to express themselves. The Psalms address the issues of life. In his exposition of Psalms 42–72, Phillips carefully explains the details of the Psalms in concise and clear language and consistently bridges the distance between the *then* of the ancient poems and the *now* of current life. Laypeople will benefit as they read the commentary with their Bibles open, and pastors will be instructed in how to turn their exegesis into meaningful sermons for their congregations.”

—**Michael Barrett**, VP for Academic Affairs/Academic Dean, Professor of Old Testament, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“The Psalms open the soul to expose the heights of worship and the depths of sorrow—sometimes in the same psalm. They are, as John Calvin put it, ‘an anatomy of all parts of the soul.’ Both informative to the mind and encouraging to the soul, Richard Phillips’s sermonic commentary leads the believer through valley and mountaintop to discover that wherever we are, our faithful God is there with us and will minister to our every need.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Richard Phillips has provided an excellent expositional commentary on the second book of the Psalter, Psalms 42–72. It is theologically rich and robust, and will be of great use to pastors as they prepare their sermons on this part of the Psalms. I am especially pleased with how the author looked toward Christ through these psalms, doing so in a good and appropriate way. May the church indeed benefit from using this fine work.”

—**John D. Currid**, Chancellor’s Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

“If your mental image of the Psalms is painted in mild, comforting pastels, look again. Pastor Richard Phillips will open your eyes to the bright and dark hues of Psalms 42–72: confusion over God’s silence as evil prevails,

appeal for God's wrath to obliterate the defiant, protestations of righteousness, brokenhearted repentance, celebration of the King's coming. Phillips situates each psalm in the experience of the ancient poets (David, Asaph, Korah's sons), helping us to hear and feel and sing these songs alongside God's people of old. He links their struggles and joys long ago with ours today. Best of all, along paths that fit these psalms' diverse themes and moods, he leads us to Christ—his humble suffering, his just wrath, his overflowing grace, his incomparable majesty.”

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Early in life and ministry, I had the privilege to read many sermons on the Psalms preached by Charles Spurgeon—*The Treasury of David*—so it is a joy to commend this commentary volume on Psalms 42–72. It will become a valuable resource in your library as you use it to draw on the Holy Spirit-given treasury of David.”

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Pastor-Teacher, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

*Psalm*s 42—72

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

*A Series*

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# *Psalms 42—72*

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

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To O. Palmer Robertson  
With thanks to God for your friendship, scholarship,  
and missionary example

and

To the Christ of the Psalms  
“Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,  
in your splendor and majesty!” (Ps. 45:3)





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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster

## *Series Introduction*

Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips  
Philip Graham Ryken  
Series Editors



## PREFACE

While rummaging in a closet not long ago, I found a box containing the first Bible given to me as a boy. It was a fine pocket-size version, containing the New Testament plus the Psalms and Proverbs. I now realize that this common omission of the bulk of the Old Testament represents an impoverishing neglect of the other thirty-seven books. Yet that inclusion of the Psalms in a pocket New Testament reveals a profound truth about the Bible's great collection of poetry: the Psalms belong to all believers, of every stripe, at all times and in all places.

Whether the Bible we carry is pocket-sized or pulpit-sized, the Psalter belongs near the heart of every Christian. In presenting these studies in book 2 of the Psalms, I feel the same amazement that impressed me when I first began preaching this great book. I knew that I was going to grow spiritually through the experience, just as I prayerfully hope that these studies will inspire readers to an enriched faith in and a deeper adoration of God.

The book of Psalms represents one of the greatest literary treasures in the history of the world. Accordingly, the thirty-one psalms in this volume are simply priceless to the hearts of seasoned believers. The eight songs of the Sons of Korah (Pss. 42–49) present a staggering achievement from the pilgrim heart at praise. From the opening scene of the deer panting for streams of living water (Ps. 42:1), through the marriage song for God's Son in Psalm 45 and Psalm 46's mighty fortress in a world falling apart, to the scenes of holy Mount Zion as the citadel of all the earth in Psalm 49, the Korahite psalms stir our hearts to remember the transcendent object of our faith in a fallen world. This pilgrim theme continues in the *maskil* psalms written by David to provide wisdom during his times of distress. Psalm 51 brings us to kneel with sin-stricken David at the foot



## *Preface*

of the cross, while Psalm 56 teaches the trembling heart to exclaim, “In God I trust; I shall not be afraid.” Psalms 61 and 62 set our feet on the strong rock that is our salvation. Taken as a whole, the sojourn songs in book 2 of the Psalter build a foundation of faith for every troubling path of the believer’s experience, inspiring us to open our souls as they thirst for the living God.

The psalms in this collection do more than inspire the trembling faith of pilgrim believers. They also provide rich doctrinal instruction. God’s glorious attributes are shown in splendor, and the saving hope of a Redeemer touches our hearts in all the quandaries of the human experience. It is not incidental that in the days when Martin Luther was discovering the doctrinal truths that would burst into history in the Protestant Reformation, his primary source was the book of Romans and the Psalms. The Psalms are gospel literature for every condition in the human experience, presenting to the searching soul a refuge in the person and work of Jesus Christ.


The material in this commentary was first preached from the pulpit of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, during 2010 and 2011. I heartily thank the Lord for the prayers, love, and support of this beloved congregation, along with the session’s support of my study-intensive ministry. My wife, especially, has been a companion in this endeavor; hers is a heart closely knit to the book of Psalms, and we have enjoyed many searching discussions of how God has met us in its pages. I am grateful as well to Philip Ryken and Iain Duguid, whose editorial comments have greatly strengthened the original core of these chapters. I am blessed to share a true spirit of brotherly labor with these gifted scholars, together with Daniel Doriani, in the REC project. For Mrs. Shirley Duncan’s loving help in copyedits I am, as always, grateful. My final thanks belong to the dedicated editorial staff of P&R Publishing, who have labored with me on many volumes and have become spiritual partners in our shared service to Christ.

This volume is dedicated to O. Palmer Robertson in appreciation of his outstanding scholarly labors and his astonishing example as a missionary servant. Little did I imagine when I first read his seminal work *The Christ of the Covenants* that I would have the privilege of seeing Palmer in action in Africa, even staying in his home outside Kampala, Uganda. In zeal, compassion, and scholarly skill, Palmer has been an inspiration to me, and I have been deeply enriched by his friendship and encouragement.

Finally, in the spirit of Palmer's books, I offer this volume to my Lord and Savior, the Christ of the Psalms: "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (Ps. 45:7).

Richard D. Phillips  
Greenville, South Carolina





*Psalms 42–72:  
Book 2 of the Psalter*

*A HEART LONGING FOR GOD*



# 1

## HOPE FOR THE DOWNCAST SOUL

### *Psalms 42–43*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil  
within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my  
salvation and my God. (Ps. 42:5–6)*



The book of Psalms is precious to Christians as our companion in the spiritual walk of faith. The Psalms take believers by the hand and guide us in our communion with God through all the varied scenes of life. These are songs of the heart that God himself teaches us to sing: songs of joy, songs of pain, songs of fear, and songs of faith. In these inspired poems we find the full range of human emotions laid bare before the heart of God in settings familiar to our experience. John Calvin commented: “What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to find words to describe . . . I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately, *an anatomy of all parts of the soul*; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”<sup>1</sup>

Book 2 of the Psalms, comprising Psalms 42–72, is distinctive for its variety of authors, including the eight psalms written by “the Sons of Korah.”

1. Quoted in Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 13.

They were a clan of Levites employed in the sacred music of the temple. They also kept the temple gates and were guardians of the ark of the covenant. This seems to explain their frequent expressions of devotion to the temple courts as the place where God's face could be seen. The Korahite motto is expressed in Psalm 84:10: "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." The fact that book 2 begins with eight psalms from the Sons of Korah suggests a focus in this collection on communion with God, especially as experienced in the liturgical life of the tabernacle and temple.

A further note about the Sons of Korah is that their namesake was one of the villains of the Old Testament. During the exodus from Egypt, Korah led a rebellion of 250 leaders against Moses and was struck down by God's judgment (Num. 16). Numbers 26:11 points out, however, that "the sons of Korah did not die," which suggests that they refused to follow in their father's rebellion. This fact reminds us that ungodly parents can produce godly children and that no child is disqualified from serving God because of the sins of his or her parents. Moreover, their awareness of God's grace in employing them in sacred service despite their family's disgrace may account in part for the intense fervor for God expressed in the psalms of the Sons of Korah.

## **FAR FROM GOD**

Scholars are widely agreed that Psalms 42 and 43 were most likely a single original composition. Psalm 43 is the only one of the psalms ascribed to the Sons of Korah to lack a superscription, which suggests that it was originally the concluding portion of Psalm 42. This perhaps explains why many ancient manuscripts combine the two psalms as one. Moreover, Psalm 43 repeats the refrain of Psalm 42—"Why are you cast down, O my soul"—and seems to fit as the final section of a unified composition. This combined poem is a song of lament from a temple servant whose heart is downcast over his separation from the presence of God.

The psalmist's chief desire—a longing for fellowship with God—is expressed by a vivid simile: "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). A thirsty deer will search until it finds

a source of water, and then it will cast itself into the stream to drink. The psalmist, distressed by a dry soul that is distant from God, thirsts for the life that he is missing: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (v. 2). God is the source of life, and his salvation is often described in Scripture as living waters. Like a deer that drinks deeply from the refreshing stream, the psalmist knows that through fellowship with God, the vigor will return to his spirit. The divine presence is not a luxury but a necessity to his existence.

As we might expect from the Korahites, who were Levitical singers, communion with God is associated here with the liturgy of the temple. “When shall I come and appear before God?” the writer asks (Ps. 42:2). It seems that the psalmist has been forced to be absent from Jerusalem and the temple courts. “I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar,” he complains (v. 6).

We do not know the exact location, but the psalmist places himself generally in the region beyond the Jordan to the north and east, located around the Mount Hermon range of mountains. *Mizar* means “little hill,” so he may be located atop one of the lesser mounts near Mount Hermon, at the northern end of Israel, 130 miles from Jerusalem. This is one of the last points from which one can glimpse the hills around the holy city while journeying north. Commentators thus suggest that the psalmist might be among the Jews being led into exile in Babylon, taking one last look at his beloved city of Jerusalem. Alternatively, King David crossed the Jordan in this region while fleeing from his rebel son Absalom, so some have wondered whether the psalmist was one of the Levites in David’s company. Whatever the cause of his separation, this psalm may be expressing “his ‘last sigh’ before [the temple] vanished forever from his sight.”<sup>2</sup>

While enduring this forced absence from the temple courts, the psalmist pines over his memories of the sacred assemblies: “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival” (Ps. 42:4). Many Christians have had the experience of moving to a place where they cannot find a church with reverent, rich, and joyful worship. Their longing for strong biblical preaching becomes almost a physical craving, like a deer panting for streams of water. The memory of

2. J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols. (1878; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 1:347.



earlier times when they reveled in the congregation, like the ancient Israelite festivals in “the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise,” only makes their desire more palpable. So it was for this Korahite, who was forced to be absent from the house of the Lord.

The homesickness that we feel when we are unable to join fellow believers for worship should call to mind the greater alienation from God that is caused by sin. The eighteenth-century preacher George Horne notes from Psalm 42 that “the Christian pilgrim cannot but bewail his exile from the heavenly Jerusalem, out of which sin hath driven him, and doomed him to wander, for a while, in the vale of misery. Led, by repentance and faith, to look back to the place from whence he is fallen, he sighs after the unspeakable joys of the celestial Zion; longing to keep a festival, and celebrate a jubilee in heaven; to join in the song of angels, and bear a part in the music of hallelujahs.”<sup>3</sup>

The psalm’s opening stanza makes an important point about worship. The psalmist speaks of missing the liturgy and the spiritual excitement of the temple and its festivals. Yet his heart is truly yearning for God himself. William Plumer comments that “truly pious men were never satisfied with the ordinances of God without the God of the ordinances.”<sup>4</sup> The psalmist’s longing, though stirred by the memory of worship services, is directed toward God himself.

Psalm 42 reminds us that true spirituality expresses itself in a longing for God. Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God” (John 17:3). Christianity is not a religion that merely consists in knowledge of doctrines, important as doctrines are; it is quite possible to know the Bible well, yet live a worldly life if we are not thirstily pursuing God. C. S. Lewis once complained that the problem with people is not that they demand too much, but that they settle for too little.<sup>5</sup> So it is for the Christian who does not seek to personally know and enjoy God. Augustine explained our need for God in the famous prayer of his *Confessions*: “Thou hast created us for thyself, and our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in thee.”<sup>6</sup>

3. George Horne, *Commentary on the Psalms* (1771; repr., Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1997), 190.

4. William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (1867; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 495.

5. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949; repr., 1980), 3–4.

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 1.1.

This opening exclamation of Psalm 42 challenges us greatly in a time when Christians seem more interested in the benefits of the Christian lifestyle than in the glory of communion with God. Do you have a passion for God? Do you realize that the true purpose of your life is the pleasure and glory of the Lord, and that the highest possession you could ever attain is spiritual communion with God? When we come to church, are we aware that we are coming into God's presence and that the elements of worship are of value only as they fix our hearts on him?

If we have a heart that seeks after God, we will be increasingly immune to the allure of the world, and our lives will bear the holy marks of his likeness. Our growth as Christians and our enjoyment of the blessings that God gives are ultimately dependent on our thirsting for God as a deer pants for flowing streams. For those of us who know too little of this great spiritual reality, the words of William Cowper's hymn should enter into our prayers:

O for a closer walk with God,  
A calm and heav'nly frame,  
A light to shine upon the road  
That leads me to the Lamb.<sup>7</sup>

## THE DOWNCAST SOUL

The psalmist proves that the most godly believers can go through times of spiritual distress. Martyn Lloyd-Jones chronicled this reality in his book *Spiritual Depression*. He wrote: "Christian people too often seem to be perpetually in the doldrums and too often give this appearance of unhappiness and of lack of freedom and absence of joy." This is one reason, he added, "why large numbers of people have ceased to be interested in Christianity."<sup>8</sup> The question raised even by Christians was expressed in the title of Erma Bombeck's book *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?*<sup>9</sup>

The answer of Psalm 42 is that life is not a bowl of cherries. The psalmist details a number of reasons that he is depressed, in addition to his separation from God. One reason is that he suffers the taunts of his enemies: "My

7. William Cowper, "O for a Closer Walk with God" (1779).

8. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 12.

9. Erma Bombeck, *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Ps. 42:3). The author is deeply grieved in his spirit, hardly able to eat because of his sorrow. Apparently some mocked that God had abandoned him: “As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (v. 10).

These are taunts that Christians may hear when we go through troubles in life. Unbelieving neighbors or coworkers may compound our distress when we lose a job, suffer an illness, or experience any number of life’s myriad woes. “What good is your religion, anyway?” they may revile. Job’s wife spat into that godly but afflicted man’s teeth: “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). We can easily imagine how such mocking depressed this psalmist, who was separated from the temple. Charles Spurgeon writes: “The wicked know that our worst misfortune would be to lose God’s favour, hence their diabolical malice leads them to declare that such is the case.”<sup>10</sup> Satan, knowing he cannot destroy God’s children, often uses such taunts to discourage and torment believers; anticipating his strategy, Christians should be alert to the danger of allowing such mockery to depress our spirits. How much more important it is that we not afflict ourselves with such thoughts of abandonment by God. Romans 8:38–39 reminds of the truth to which we must cling in our trials: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Not only was the psalmist faced with taunts, however, but he was oppressed as well with malicious assaults. “Vindicate me, O God,” he cries, “and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!” (Ps. 43:1). He has been unjustly attacked, just as everyone who tries to live a God-honoring life will sometimes be unjustly maligned or mistreated. Paul informs us that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The oppression is so great that the writer feels overwhelmed by his trials. He expresses this in Psalm 42:7: “Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.” He is in the region where the headwaters of the Jordan

10. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 1:2:271.

roar in the canyons, and the sound of raging waters from the deep reminds him of the troubles that are pouring over his head.

This leads to a third cause of his distress: his fear that God really has abandoned him: “I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” (Ps. 42:9). Here is an example of the honesty that makes the book of Psalms such a help to God’s people. The psalm writers pour out their hearts, admitting their doubts, fears, and complaints against God; realizing this encourages our authenticity in our own prayer lives. God knows how we are feeling, and a step in recovering ourselves spiritually is to express ourselves honestly and openly to God. At the same time, the psalmist calls upon God as “my rock,” reminding us to unburden our hearts in an attitude of faith.

## HOPE IN GOD

Psalm 42 is valuable not only in depicting spiritual depression but also in showing the biblical way to deal with a downcast heart. We see this in the refrain that occurs three times: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5–6).

Lloyd-Jones comments on how the psalmist directly confronts his doubting and depressed spirit: “This man was not content just to lie down and commiserate with himself. He does something about it, he takes himself in hand.”<sup>11</sup> The psalmist challenges his poor state of mind, asking, “Why are you cast down, O my soul . . . ?” Lloyd-Jones points out that whereas the man’s depressed heart had been talking to him and dictating his attitude, he now talks to his heart and begins dictating to it. “The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself,” he writes. “You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down’—what business have you to be disquieted?”<sup>12</sup> In this way, Spurgeon says, “his faith reasons with his fears, his hope argues with his sorrows.”<sup>13</sup>

It is important to recognize *what* the psalmist preached to his soul, because we must not seek to address our depression with false remedies. He does not

11. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 20.

12. *Ibid.*, 21.

13. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 1:2:272.

say, “Don’t worry; everything will be all right,” or “You can handle it.” These are ways that the world seeks to overcome its depression. But the Christian argues not on the basis of his or her own virtue or the goodness of the world, neither of which is true. Instead, the Christian regains his footing by preaching the truth about God to himself. The psalmist says to his soul, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5–6).

First, the psalmist encourages himself with *his knowledge of God* as a mighty Savior. He describes God as his rock (Ps. 42:9), as a refuge into which he can run (43:2), and as “God my exceeding joy” (43:4). Here we see the great value of knowing the attributes of God. The sovereign God is unfazed by all the powers of the world arrayed against his people. God is faithful and steadfast in deliverance. When we appeal to God, we obtain almighty help that is undaunted by any dangers in this world. Plumer writes, “The more terrible the storm, the more necessary is the anchor.”<sup>14</sup> Regaining his courage with the truths that he knows about God, the psalmist commands his soul, “Hope in God.”

Second, the psalmist preaches *God’s sovereign grace* to his downcast soul: “By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life” (Ps. 42:8). This expression that God “commands his steadfast love” is a marvelous truth. God’s saving mercy does not operate according to its own fickle fancy but goes forth at God’s command. Since God has promised mercy to those who call on him through Jesus Christ, his grace for the believer is as certain as the fixed order of the seasons. God has covenanted himself to save and uphold all who believe in his Son, and God commands his steadfast love in accordance with his sovereign promises in Christ. This is why, in addition to knowing the attributes of God, Christians are able to encourage their downcast hearts by knowing and memorizing the promises of God in Scripture. An example of such a Scripture is Jesus’ promise: “this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40). Spurgeon writes: “No day shall ever dawn on an heir of grace and find him altogether forsaken of his Lord: the Lord reigneth, and as a sovereign he will with authority command mercy to be reserved for his chosen.”<sup>15</sup> Armed with the truth of sovereign grace,

14. Plumer, *Psalms*, 503.

15. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 1:2:275.

“remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the psalmist preaches to his heart the great value of *the means of grace* that God has provided to his people. He appeals to God, “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God” (Ps. 43:3–4). This is the call of a distressed Christian who opens the Bible and finds the light of God’s Word. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” David exclaims (Ps. 119:105). The psalmist pleads with his heart to anticipate a return to God’s courts; we, too, can remind our downcast hearts that our prayers in Christ’s name will enter God’s presence. As the psalmist spoke of going to God’s altar with joy, we should preach to our hearts, “Go to the ministry of God’s Word, seek the altar of grace in prayer, and look forward again to gathering with God’s people for worship.” In this way, even in a depressing world, we may take our hearts in hand and speak truths about the saving grace awaiting us through God’s Word and prayer.

## PSALM 42 AND THE CROSS

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus applied words from Psalm 42:6 to his own distressed spirit, when he told the disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt. 26:38). Jesus’ experience is one more proof that Christians should not be ashamed to admit a distressed soul. It may at first discourage us to see that even God’s Son was overcome with grief. But the Gospels tell us that the Savior entered into our sorrows in order to deliver us. Earlier on the day of his arrest, Jesus alluded to the distress of Psalm 42, saying, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27). We do not know what caused the writer of Psalm 42 to be far from God, but we certainly know why Jesus endured a bitter alienation from communion with his Father. Jesus suffered a separation from the Father greater than the distance from Mount Hermon to Jerusalem, and suffered a raging torment more violent than the waters churning in the Jordan’s deep canyons, all to deliver us from the judgment of God on our sins. We therefore can joyfully

16. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 21.

## *Hope for the Downcast Soul*

hope for our restoration to the holy courts of heaven because the chasm was bridged by the cross of Christ.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that “for the joy that was set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Just as his was the downcast sorrow of Psalm 42, so also was his joy of its refrain: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:11). Even in the darkness of the cross, Jesus rejoiced in the hope of God’s resurrection promise. That is a promise we share, if we have committed our cause to Jesus, who pledges that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Christ’s saving work should lift up our downcast souls in any form of distress: “I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Because of Jesus, God will never forsake us and will raise us up on the last day. This gospel is cause enough for us to say, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”

I earlier noted that God’s mercy in accepting the sons of a guilty man such as Korah must surely have played a part in their intense fervor to know and serve the Lord. Since God has shown even greater grace for us, sending his own Son to bear and remove the curse of our sin, how much more gratefully ought we to long for communion with him, and fervently echo the passion for God expressed in this psalm: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1).