

⁵ 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.

The psalmist starts with a striking picture ... a thirsty deer panting for water. I've seen that when I've been deer hunting. A buck will be so crazy in the rutting season that it won't stop chasing the does. If it is a warm November day, it will work up a raging thirst. Bucks have been known to die on the field of love because they didn't take the time to get a drink of water.

Have you ever been so thirsty that you felt like fainting? When you are dehydrated, your muscles become weak. You can hardly think straight. Your vision might even be blurred. You experience a kind of exhaustion that suddenly overwhelms you.

Maybe that hasn't happened to you physically, but has it ever happened to you spiritually? That's what the psalmist is talking about in our text. He describes himself as a soul that is parched. He describes himself as a soul that is downcast and in despair. He can't feel God in his life. Have you ever felt like that? I am guessing that you have. Maybe that's how you feel right now. Maybe not right now, but you've probably been through those dry-soul days. Praying through this Psalm will help us pray through the troubles in our lives.

We pray our despair before God!

1. The cause of our despair

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" What would make you feel like that before God? The number one cause of a dry soul, a despairing soul, is sin. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, he spoke about what that felt like in his soul. **"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me"** (Psalm 32.3-4). It was as if David lived with in internal darkness that blotted out any ray of joy in his life.

Sin can do that to you. A sin which you have not confessed before God will rot your soul. A sin which you permit to linger in your life will put a darkness in your heart. It becomes a toxic addiction that poisons your spirit and sucks the spiritual life out of you. There is only one cure for the despair that sin causes. God must do an intervention with you, the way he did for David. He sent the prophet Nathan first to expose him for the sinner that he was, and then to declare to him that God had forgiven his sin. In his book, *"Jesus + Nothing = Everything,"* Tullian Tchividjian says that Christians must preach the gospel to themselves every day or risk living on the precipice of despair.

Having said that, the psalmist doesn't not confess that sin is the cause of his despairing soul. There are other reasons why we might be experiencing spiritual dryness before God. Listen to what he says in verse 4. **"These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy."** The psalmist is describing a time when he was separated from God's people and the worship of God's people. Commentators are divided on guessing what those circumstances were. Some

say this psalm was written for David when he had to flee from Absalom. He was locked out of Jerusalem and he couldn't go up to the temple for worship. Anything that meant anything to him was taken away. His own family turned on him. He had to give up his throne. He couldn't go up to the temple to pray. In Jerusalem, David built his palace right beneath the temple so that he could go there often. Others think it describes the Babylonian Captivity and the despair God's people felt because they weren't able to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Personally I think that the psalmist leaves it open so that it could apply to any situation when we can't join God's people in worship. You might be a college student in a place where you can't find a church you are comfortable worshipping in. You might be a soldier deployed overseas. You might be a shut-in or someone hospitalized for a long time.

In my twenties I worked for two summers in Glacier Park. I read my Bible almost every day, but there really wasn't any place where I could meet with fellow Christians and *worship*. I remember taking the train home at the end of summer. I remember wanting to see my parents' faces. But I remember more than anything that I couldn't wait to go to church with them. I was like a deer panting for streams of water.

Dear friends, there is something that I see happening in our culture today that is very damaging to people's souls. I hear a philosophy about religion expressed in this way. "I don't have to go to church to be a good Christian." Can you show me where it says that in the Bible? Can you show me where Jesus teaches us that worshipping with God's people is not important? Ask a Christian soldier whose been in the field for a month if worshipping with God's people is important. Ask a shut-in who would drag herself to church if she could whether worshipping with God's people is important. Besides, how do you know you are right unless you are bouncing your ideas and feelings off fellow Christians? How do you keep warm without worshipping with God's people?

The psalmist in our text gives us clues to some other reasons why he was feeling this despair before God, this spiritual drought. Look at verse 9-10. **⁹I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" ¹⁰My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"** It is hard to feel the presence of God in your life when you are suffering. You are blessed if you are surrounded by Christian friends who remind you that God is on your side. Sometimes you have friends who don't even know what to say to you. When you've just lost your husband or wife, you feel this loneliness that makes you feel dry in side. When you're battling cancer and your body feels like you have the flu all the time, it's hard not to despair. You probably don't have people taunting you in those times, but the devil surely does. "Where is your God," he says. "Why isn't God helping you?"

What else? Look at verse 2. **"When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night."** Something is bothering the psalmist and it keeps him awake day and night. When you are in one of those dry spells, could it be that you've allowed yourself to be preoccupied with other things and that you are not taking care of yourself physically or spiritually? For umpteen thousand years, there was a simple rhythm to life. When it was light out, you got up and worked. When it got dark, you went to bed. I can't imagine that anyone in the pioneer days worked a night shift. And then Thomas Edison got a bright idea and invented

the light bulb. Now we can sit at our laptops doing work for tomorrow, watch the late night news while we are doing it, and then go to bed and expect to fall asleep. Could your spiritual dryness be a result of your preoccupation with your work?

What do all of these things have in common? You have a preoccupation with sin. There's a separation from worship and from God's people. There is a focus on the suffering that has come into your life. There's a preoccupation on something – perhaps your work, that you dwell on night and day. What's the common thread? You know longer have God in the cross-hairs of this life. That's the cause. What's the cure?

2. The cure for our despair

So the psalmist gives multiple reasons why he feels this dryness in his soul, this despair in his spiritual life. But he always comes up with the same cure for his spiritual sickness. What he does is preach to his own heart. ⁵ **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.** First he is asking himself a question. Why are you downcast? Why are you so disturbed? That sounds like a silly thing to do, but it's not.

If you have ever been in counseling with a therapist, the therapist will often ask you that very question. "What's bothering you?" And you will think for a moment and you will come up blank. "I don't know what's bothering me." So the therapist starts to ask you some questions. When you go to bed at night and you can't get to sleep, what are you thinking about? Are there times in the day when you feel more disturbed than at other times? Do you see what he is doing? He is getting you to ask yourself the question so that you can begin to probe more deeply into your heart. In order to preach to yourself, first you have to listen to yourself.

Every pastor knows this. When someone calls us to make funeral plans, we will go out of our way to meet with the family and make those plans together. Very often in the conversations that we have with family members, we hear what bothers them the most about this sad event. Someone says, "I never got to say good-bye to my mom." We listen to those things so that when we preach the sermon for that funeral, we can address your grief, not just in a general way, but in specific ways. In the same way, if we listen carefully to our hearts, we can better preach the gospel to ourselves.

"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." "Put your hope in God," the psalmist tells his soul. When we have looked hard at answering the question "why" we are so disturbed, we will discover that we have been putting our hopes in the wrong place. If you are trying to find your joy in the work that you do, then losing your job is the end of the world. If you are trying to find your joy in the person you've fallen in love with, then separation from that person will destroy you. So answer the question for yourself. Why is your soul down cast? Why are you so disturbed? And then preach a sermon to your soul. "Put your hope in God, because my God and my Savior will never disappoint me!"

But what should you say to your soul? For several years now I have had a Christian life coach, just to keep me balanced. One of the things that he does is to challenge me to have a Bible passage memorized for different situations in life. Are you experiencing a lonely time in your life? Is your soul downcast because of it? God says in Hebrews 13.5: **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you!”** Are you weak and sick and facing an uncertain future in your life? In Jeremiah 29.11, it says, **“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”** The Bible is filled with watering holes for our soul. If your soul is down cast and disturbed, preach a good, gospel sermon to yourself and make sure you choose a good text! This psalm could be one of those texts.

So ask your soul what’s troubling you, then preach a good gospel sermon to your soul, and finally, look to Jesus. Do you see Jesus in this psalm? Listen to some of these verses, and tell me what you see in them. **“I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”** Do you see Jesus in these words? Do you see him cry out that he has been forsaken by God, because for your sake, he really was? Do you see the enemies of Jesus taunting him saying, “Let God rescue him?” Do you see Jesus who was literally dying of thirst crying out in agony? Do you see Jesus separated from his people and dying alone and abandoned on the cross?

Friends, if the Savior did this for you, how can you ever lose hope? If your sins trouble you, you know they are forgiven. If death terrifies you, you know that Jesus rose from the dead. If you are lonely and in despair, you know that your Savior cannot forsake you ever. If you are going through tough times in your life, don’t you think the God who planned your salvation also has a plan for our life? **“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.”**

I want you to do something for me. I want you to raise your index finger and put it in front of your eyes while you are looking at the cross. First I want you to focus on your finger – with your eyes crossed – so that you can see the little lines in your skin that make finger prints. What happens to the cross? What happens to Jesus? He’s out of focus. When we let our eyes become fixed on the problems of this world and our life, is it any wonder that our soul is downcast? Now keep your finger there and focus on the cross. Do you see what happens? You hardly see your finger at all. The same happens to your troubles when you focus on Jesus and put your hope in him.

“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.” Amen.