



A READING OF PSALM 42

Posted on February 1, 2020 by Alan Wilson



A potential danger we need to be careful of is when our 'Feelings' can badly mislead us if they are not controlled by a realistic grasp of the real world. Feelings do not always represent facts.

What do I mean by that? Many of the Psalms provide the reader with a biblical model where there is proper integration of Heart AND Mind. Often the Psalmist confesses the intensity of his feelings, but he never surrenders to mindless emotionalism. He always attempts to bring his feelings within the realm of God's character and will.

We are all fearfully and wonderfully made. We are all complex and complicated creatures capable of good and evil; but we are prone to breakdowns. Whether it's a broken toe or a broken mind, it can happen to the best of us.

We all have a temperament; some are fiery, some are happy go lucky, some are melancholy. We tend to be stuck with our temperament just like the animals in Winnie the Pooh.

Many Christians through the ages have had 'unhappy moods' we tend to call it 'Depression' today. William Cowper the hymn writer and the great preacher C.H. Spurgeon both knew depression. However, Depression is not necessarily a sign of spiritual weakness. It can be an opportunity for spiritual growth.

I doubt if there is any portion of the bible that demonstrates this point more dramatically than Psalms 42 and 43. Both Psalms actually form a single hymn and are very similar in content. "Why are you downcast, O my soul. Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God." This psalm was clearly written out of an experience of the most intense sadness of heart. It is a Psalm composed by someone in the midst of depression.

We will join these two Psalms together and try and answer the author's own questions. What were the causes and symptoms of this depression; 'Why are you downcast O my soul. Why so disturbed within me?

And then we look at the response to this depression. 'Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.' As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you, O God.' Here is a

man who is depressed because he feels God is a long way away.

He likens himself to a drought-stricken animal sniffing at the dried-up river beds and longing for water but finding none. The experience of God's presence seems to be equally elusive.

God has become inaccessible to him. If you have felt like that sometimes, do not despair; it is quite a common experience. We should always remember at this point that there is a huge difference in the world, between feeling forsaken by God, and actually being forsaken by God.

The two are worlds apart. This is where we need to be very careful about are emotional feelings and where objective truth really lies. Remember feelings do not always represent facts.

I think we can safely assume that the person who wrote this Psalm was a Christian. When a Christian is depressed, that depression almost invariably, results in a sense of spiritual desertion. What do I mean by that; I mean where Prayer becomes difficult, almost impossible. Bible reading becomes a chore. Any talk of peace and joy sounds unreal. God seems more like a very distant relative than a heavenly loving, Father.

God seems remote, not because he is remote, but because our depression makes us feel as though he is. The truth is that God is not remote. But as human beings we are complicated creatures, being made up of body, mind, and spirit, which are all joined together. Remember feelings do not always represent facts.

Therefore, one part affects the other, sometimes in an irrational way. So, we need to counter balance that with the objective truth as it is revealed to us in scripture. If our emotional make up is disturbed by certain factors it can affect our Spiritual awareness too.

Of course, depression can happen in a person's life as a direct result of Spiritual factors as well as emotional ones. If we fall into sin and are therefore suffering the emotional consequence of sin, that is guilt, we may find within us a deep misery.

One cause of depression is Spiritual Isolation where God 'feels' as if he is remote and distant.

Another is Physical Isolation. The psalmist here was not suffering from the pangs of guilt or unbelief he was just physically isolated. He writes; '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 and thanksgiving among the festive throng.'

This person sounds as if he was one of the Levitical singers in the choir at the temple in Jerusalem. The high point of his life had been the great religious festivals when he would take his privileged place at the head of the congregation leading them in through the temple gates for their annual services of celebration. But for one reason or another he could not, or was not allowed, to participate in those joyous occasions. Perhaps he was one of the exiles taken into Babylonian captivity and not allowed back.

Whatever the circumstances this person is homesick. He was deeply attached to Jerusalem. The city meant so much to him. Yet he was separated from it wondering would he ever see it again. We have all experienced being homesick which is enough to make anybody depressed. We all need physical roots, and when they are severed, we feel down unable to get up. He was also socially Isolated which is even worse. He says; 'Men say to me all day long, where is your God?

Whether these men were unsympathetic fellow Israelites or vindictive Babylonians, it is clear he had no friends to confide in. His social environment was hostile and humiliating; 'where is your God, they asked him with utter contempt.' You claim to be a believer. Well, God isn't doing much for you at the moment is he. Your god is only a myth. It had been comparatively easy to trust God in Jerusalem amidst all the joyful celebrations of the temple choir going into the house of God. But now things have changed.

He was on his own, without emotional support or personal encouragement from his friends. He was lonely. Loneliness can make you feel terribly sad; it is enough to make anybody feel depressed. God made us to be sociable creatures, gregarious by nature. When we are deprived of supportive relationships it really gets us down. With the collapse of family values and family structures in our society, one parent families almost the norm, we see the fallout all around us; with the NHS in the UK as but one provider, unable to cope with mental health issues.

With a combination of feeling that God is not there, and homesickness, it is bound to trigger depression of some sort. For him it wasn't sin or lack of faith or the devil, which had produced this morbid mood. It was a perfectly natural consequence of the unfortunate situation he was in. Indeed, many of the

symptoms he goes on to describe are typical of the kind of depressive reaction that anybody with a tendency to be melancholy experiences in such circumstances.

"My tears have been my food day and night." He cannot stop crying. They have been his food; he has lost his appetite. You will see that the word "Downcast" is used a number of times.

There is no spark, no enthusiasm for anything; just a kind of inner fatigue. A sagging of the spirit. Depressed people often complain of being permanently tired.

He uses the word "disturbed" repeatedly. He experiences an emotional roller coaster; restless nights, sighs and moans from within. There is a feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. Being drowned by their circumstances. I can't get my head above water; a person may say.

And then culminating in all these symptoms are; feelings of Rejection. "Why have you forgotten me? His whole personality is being torn by a sense of loss. Like a lover jilted. Like a widow grieving for her husband. He feels bereft, devastated and heart broken. As a deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you O God.' For him depression becomes a spiritual problem and not just an emotional one. He feels spiritually depressed but not because he is spiritually negligent in any way, but simply because he is a Spiritual person. Why are you downcast, why so disturbed within me?"

Like so many Christians in such a situation, this inspired poet finds himself bewildered and frustrated because he feels like this. As a believer he says; I shouldn't feel like this. Why am I so downcast? What has happened to me? What has happened to me faith?

It is natural to ask questions like that. And though we ought Not to feel like this, there is no criticism or condemnation. Indeed, it could be argued that as this man wrestles with his depression it is not a sign of weakness; but of strength as he desires to be where he knows he should be, spirituality.

So, what then is the Response?? The first thing is to Face up to our feelings. Many depressed people try to find some escape from their emotions through alcohol, drugs, medication, or some other diversion. Others erect defensive barriers, and pretend to be OK.

If we are going to cope with depression satisfactorily, we must admit our feelings, look at them in the eye, to try and gain some insight into why we have got them. And that is what the psalmist is doing. It takes courage and strength to face up to the truth like that. Whatever the cause there is nothing to be gained by running away from that sort of admission. We must despite our pride, admit our negative feelings to ourselves and to God also.

In these Psalms look at the number of times he asks; 'why'. The reason he is asking, 'why' so much, is not because there will be an answer, because in 99% of cases there isn't; it is to do with exasperation that is boiling away inside.

A kind of repressed anger. Some incident, hurt, or loss, perhaps of a parent in childhood, or divorce, has often been the trigger. What happens is; that if that person is a Christian those angry feelings that are bottled up within, whatever their original cause may be, get transferred on to GOD. After all, he is our substitute parent, he is our father, he is supposed to be in charge. He is our rock, our stronghold. He is to blame for how I feel. It is far from unusual to find that a Christian suffering from depression feels inwardly angry with God. It is therefore vital if a person feels like that, that they need a release valve for those feelings. If we are angry with God, we need to find the courage to tell him so.

An incident is recorded in a novel, [*The Blood of the Lamb*](#). The main character of the book has a daughter, and on her 12th birthday she dies of leukemia. The father finds himself devastated by the news right outside a church. He was still holding the birthday cake; he was taking to the hospital to try to inject some happiness into this special day in his daughter's life. As he looks at the crucifix on the church wall; he suddenly explodes with rage and hurls the cake at the face of Christ.

Now, I have to say that I would NOT recommend people to follow this type of action. Some might even say it was intensely blasphemous. Perhaps it was; and yet there is a sense in which that is what Christ is on the cross for.

He is a symbol of anger, rage, and disgust. Where God the Father is showing anger and rage at his Son. That's why Jesus cried out, 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me.'? He is the symbol of the passionate anger of Almighty God against all the sin and wickedness of this world.

He is the symbol of that divine anger venting itself as a healing balm upon a hurting world. In one huge

event of divine passion God reconciles himself to a hating sinful world. The pain God felt on the cross, was the same kind of pain that bereaved father was feeling.

The evil and the injustice and the fallenness of this sick world had stolen the person he loved best. God the Father felt the same at losing his one and only Son; but he allowed it to happen in order to reconcile us with himself, and bring healing to the world through his Son. His Son took our punishment, our shame and our sin, to give us the hope of new life, for all those who look to him and believe in him.

This is a huge subject and so we need to draw things to a close.

God is only to be truly known by people who are prepared to plumb the depths of their own human experience.

In other words, we need to get real with ourselves, real with God, and admit our weaknesses, our failings and our sin. That is the best starting point for any person. With so many people who come under the 'banner' of Christianity there is massive superficiality.

Generally, we are shallow Christians who have simply never met with God at this profound level that the Psalmist has. For the majority of us we have never really felt spiritually thirsty, a deep hunger for God's word, or prayed desperately to God.

The whole intensity of this man's spiritual life is totally foreign to us. Perhaps it's because we have it so good. Like the LG logo; life is good. Why not pray today for a real encounter with the living God. Don't be afraid to get beyond believing things about God. You will find that he is much more than you bargained for.

Rev Alan Wilson is a recently retired Presbyterian Minister in Northern Ireland. He was a former Police Officer during the 'troubles' before going into the ministry. He is married to Ann and they are now proud grandparents of Jacob and Cora. He enjoys keeping Alpaccas, gardening, watching football and learning how theology relates to the environment and the world at large. He and his wife spent a summer Exchange in 2018 with a Presbyterian Church in Toronto.

The image shows one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah by Stuart Shelby.

