

AS THE DEER ... DESPAIRS?

Do you ever find yourself in deep despair? The author of Psalms 42-43 did. Three times in these two short psalms he asked himself, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5).

The psalmist was a refugee. For reasons beyond his control, he'd been forced to leave Jerusalem and dwell among people who didn't know the true and living God. "My tears have been my food day and night, while *they* say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:3). The longer he sojourned, the worse things got. "As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:10).

Before his exile, the psalmist treasured worshipping at the house of God. "These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. 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" (Psalm 42:4). Exiled, he was cut off from the house of God and soon in deep despair. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalm 42:1-2). "O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling places. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy" (Psalms 43:3-4).

The psalmist, however, didn't remain in deep despair. He came to himself. He began pushing his thoughts around instead of letting them push him around and he quickly regained the heights of joy and peace. Here's the good news—we can do the same! Here's how he did it.

First, he realized he needed to talk to God about what he was thinking and feeling. "A prayer to the God of my life. I will say to God my rock, 'Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'" (Psalm 42:8-9). "You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?" (Psalm 43:2). Be careful how you read these passages. The psalmist wasn't bitterly venting against God. He was simply expressing how he honestly felt and seeking straight answers to fair questions. When we're in deep despair, God wants us to do the same. He cares, has the answers we need, and desperately wants to lift our spirits.

Second, he realized he needed God's help. "Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!" (Psalm 43:1). In a world where we control so little, we need the God who controls it all.

Third, he realized God was going to help. The psalmist told himself three times, "Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him" (Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5). Why could he say this? He knew God was present and would help him (Psalm 42:5). Why did he *keep* saying this? Because when doubts and fears penetrate our thoughts, we must repeatedly resist them with truth until they're banished from our brains.

Fourth, he realized God meant this for good. "Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; all Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me" (Psalm 42:7). Though in deep despair, the psalmist saw God's purpose for the turbulence in his life. Yes, Satan was using it to crush him, but God was using it to make him stronger. "The LORD will command His loving-kindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night" (Psalm 42:8). Not everything that happens in life is good, but if we truly love God, good can come from anything that happens in life (Romans 8:28).

Fifth, he realized things weren't as bad as he'd imagined. No, he couldn't worship as he preferred, but he could still worship. "O my God, my soul is in despair within me; therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar" (Psalm 42:6). We despair because we think our glass is half empty. It's not half-empty or even half-full. If we look at it properly, it's overflowing. How's this for perspective. I have a friend whose fifteen-year-old daughter is dying from a brain tumor. Do I *really* have any problems? Do you? Neither did the psalmist. He realized it. So should we.

Sixth, he realized he was responsible for his own despair. Three times the psalmist asked himself, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5). In other words, "Why am I doing this to myself?" The psalmist knew his inner joy and peace didn't depend on outward circumstances, but on his attitude towards them. Yes, it's humbling to admit we make ourselves miserable. But, it's liberating to know we can just as easily choose happiness. Emotionally we are not victims of things beyond our control! The psalmist twice described God as "the help of my countenance" (Psalm 42:11; 43:5). The psalmist learned the following. So must we. "Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, 'It is well with my soul.'"

As the deer ... despairs? No, as the deer pants for the water brooks so our souls should pant for God. If we'll drink deeply, everything else will fall into place.