

Stuck In A Spiritual Rut

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[0:00] Psalm 42. One of the sons of Korah asks himself in this psalm, 'Why are you downcast, O my soul?'

! Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. Haven't we been seeing, if you've been here on Sunday evenings, the discouragement is not some sort of rare, unusual bird.

It's not exotic at all. It's sort of like seeing a cardinal. You wouldn't be shocked or surprised if you had a cardinal in your front yard or a cardinal building a nest.

And in the same way, discouragement and being downcast is no stranger to us. The psalmist knew it. And so he asks himself, why are you so downcast, O my soul?

And buried in that question is the idea that, yes, the discouragement is real. There's no denying it. There's no point in saying you don't feel it.

[1:10] The discouragement is real, but ultimately buried within that question is the realization or the point that there's ultimately no final good reason for it.

There's no way that you can finally completely go from here are all the facts to, yep, you have every reason to be discouraged. You have every reason to be downcast.

There are reasons to be downcast. There are reasons to be discouraged. And yet what the psalmist is telling us and buried within that question is there are more reasons to be encouraged, whatever your state is.

You might have reasons, legitimate reasons to be discouraged, but you have even better reasons to take courage. Now, we've talked about several cases.

That's what we've been talking about in these Sunday afternoons. We've talked about several cases already. This afternoon, I want to talk about the case of struggling or having struggles with your devotions, with your spiritual duties, with prayer, with reading your Bible, with even listening to sermons.

[2:26] And maybe that's where you're at. It's like you have come down with a spiritual cold. And you know, when you have a physical cold, food doesn't have so much flavor.

Food, you don't want it. Maybe you've come down with a spiritual cold, and you haven't fallen into some great sin. The Lord has kept you from that.

And yet, when you go to pray, it can almost be like pulling teeth. Or you go to read.

You go to read this word, and it's like rain falling on the sidewalk. And you know, whether it rains softly or rains hard, the sidewalk is impenetrable.

Maybe that's what it's like. Nothing seems to be getting through. Or you've even come here to listen. And maybe you can even say, objectively, I know that that sermon was good.

[3:25] It was full of truth. And maybe at one time, it would have moved me. But it doesn't do that anymore. I go to prayer, and it's nothing but distractions.

I go to listen, and I have a hard time doing it. It feels like I'm never getting to Jesus. Shouldn't I feel discouraged?

Shouldn't I be downcast? Isn't that a good enough reason for me to be so discouraged? And I would want to say, let me tell you, I understand firsthand the misery of that.

Even in Psalm 42, the psalmist, one of the sons of Korah, knew exactly that feeling.

The dryness. The distance. You can see what I'm talking about in verse 4. Oh, these things I remember as I pour out my soul.

[4:30] So now he's remembering. These aren't things that are present realities. These are things that are past realities. I used to go up with a multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

I used to. I used to be the first in line. I used to be full of thanksgiving. I used to be able to shout with joy as I was surrounded by God's people.

But now I'm far away. And now there's this great emptiness in my heart. He talks about that. He talks about deep, calls out to deep and the roar of your waterfalls.

And you can imagine a cave with just the echoes. That's what it's like. Old things are now just echoing in his heart. And so maybe that's where you're at.

I'm far away. It's all just a memory. My heart is desolate. The psalmist knew and knows your pain. Knows that discouragement. And yet he says, ultimately, there's no final good reason to be so downcast.

[5:47] So totally discouraged. And so there's reasons to hope in God. There's reasons to hope in God. That this is not the final say. This is not the last word.

There's hope in God. And so I want to just give you three reasons. If this is where you're at, or I'll put it this way, if this is not where you're at presently, it's probable that you will be there.

So three encouragements for where you are, or maybe even where you will be. And the first is that you need to remember that you are in a covenant of grace and not of works.

The covenant you are in with God, the relationship that we heard about this morning, that relationship, that covenant that establishes the relationship between you and God, is a covenant of grace.

It's not works-based. At least it's not based on our works. It's based on Christ's works. So what is it to be in a works-based covenant?

[7:04] Galatians 3 kind of gives the sum of it. Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. What is it like?

What is the demand? What is the expectation? This is what you need to maintain the covenant. It's continual. It's perfect. Perfect obedience or you're cursed.

But Galatians tells us that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He rescued us from that curse because none of us had lived up to that perfect, perpetual obedience.

And in our spiritual duties, prayer, reading, listening, any other spiritual duty, can any of us say, oh, I have perpetual, perfect, I do it perfectly.

We can't say that. And Christ redeemed us from that curse by becoming a curse for us. And in doing so, we heard about this this morning, He's brought us into a new covenant, a different situation.

[8:11] And so what is the situation now? What is the covenant like? Well, Romans 5.1 gives you the gist of it. Summarizes it.

Puts it in a little package. He says, Since we've been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

And so you stand in God's grace. The relationship between you and God is a gracious relationship. The posture of God's heart toward you is a gracious posture.

It's not cursed if you don't continue to do everything written in the book of the law. It's not that. You stand in grace. And what does that mean? How does that flesh out in this situation of you're struggling with your devotions?

You have a hard time reading. You're constantly distracted. How does that work in this situation? Well, you go to pray and you fail.

[9:24] You go to read and you fail. You go to hear a sermon, you look back and you just say, I hardly heard a word. I don't remember.

I mean, I think we can all relate to I sat there and I walked out and it feels like I can't even remember a single thing. How does this, what does this covenant of grace tell us?

What does God say? In Hosea 2, He says, I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me forever. I'll take you as my spouse forever.

He's talking about His people. God is saying, I'm going to marry you and I'm going to take you as my spouse forever. And wives, do you?

Do you divorce your husbands for a failure? For every failing. Or husbands, do you divorce your wife? Or wives, do you divorce your husbands? We don't do that.

[10:33] Do we? We don't do that. In love, we bear with one another and God says, He's not going to put you away.

Divorce you. Be done with you. Write you off for your weaknesses and your failures. God is not about to send you to the curb because of these things. He knew your sin.

He went into the marriage eyes wide open with a greater knowledge of your weakness and your failures than even yourself. Isn't that the truth that we go through our lives discovering God goes into the relationship knowing it all.

He knew your flesh. He knew your weakness. And yet, He took you to Himself. Now is He going to send you away? Now that you're sick? Where things aren't going so well?

Well, it's grace. It's not works. It's the basis of the relationship. What is the law's response to failure? Well, it can only point to the failure.

[11:40] It can only tell us what we should do or should have done. It can only condemn us when we have failed. But what is grace's response to failure?

What is grace's response? Well, failure moves grace to forgiveness. Weakness moves grace to mercy.

Dullness moves grace to give life. And so God has not moved to scorn or to arms crossed disapproval, so to speak.

Where He wants to put us away and get your life together and then you can come back to Me. So why shouldn't you be discouraged or downcast?

Because God is your God of grace. God is your God of grace and He's moved to pity. He's moved to patience. He's moved to kindness. He's moved to love. He's moved to mercy.

[12:38] Because that's the bent of His heart towards you. That's the relationship that you're in. You stand in grace. And so even now, while you're struggling in that battle against the flesh, realize that God's heart is a gracious heart towards you.

Now the second reason you shouldn't be discouraged is all of your spiritual duties come to God. They're offered to God through Jesus Christ.

So your prayers, weak, dull, distracted prayers that they are, they come to God through Jesus Christ.

He is our priest. We never have this direct, isolated relationship between God and myself. It's always, we always come on the arm of Jesus Christ.

He's our priest. He holds the bowl of incense that is our prayers. If we went straight from ourselves to God, with no Jesus, we would have a reason to be discouraged.

[13:38] We would have nothing to hide all those failures. But all of our prayers, all of our service comes to God through Jesus Christ. And Jesus knows how to pluck out the chaff and present the wheat.

He knows how to pluck out the flies and present the perfume. We talked in Sunday school three or four or five weeks ago, something like that, about the Holy Spirit, His role in our prayer life and the spiritual duties that we're talking about.

And the Spirit is the Spirit of prayer. He's the author of prayer. By Him we pray. In His strength, we are presented to God. We go to God. We pray in the Spirit.

And so, in all of our prayers, in all of your prayers, there is something of your sin. There's something of you. But you know what?

There's also something of God Himself. Spirit. There's something of Christ. And God won't throw away His just because it's mixed with ours.

[14:45] And God won't say the whole thing is defiled because some of ours is mixed with some of His. Our prayers are accepted for Jesus' sake.

Your prayers, as weak as they are, maybe all you have to offer is a dull heart to God. And that's, it should be better.

It's not right that it is this way, but you have this dull heart. And maybe that is all you have to offer. And then I want to say don't be discouraged. That dull heart is carried by the Spirit of God.

And it's covered with Jesus' blood. God is presented to the Father with those pierced hands of Jesus Christ. And He'll accept it. And He'll be moved to mercy.

And so don't be discouraged. There's more, what I'm saying is there's more going on than just what is going on in your heart. The Holy Spirit is at work.

[15:44] Jesus Christ has taken us to Himself. And so don't be discouraged. Third, last, don't be discouraged because remember you are God's child. You're God's child.

And here we want to argue from the lesser to the greater. And if your child was sick, if your child was sick, would you turn a cold heart to Him or to her just because she was having a hard time speaking to you?

Would you disinherit disinherit or disavow them just because they got some disease that made them mute and unable to speak almost as in a coma?

And sometimes we are almost in a spiritual coma, aren't we? We go to pray and we don't, there's no words. We're almost trapped.

You hear those stories of people that are trapped in that state of coma and they can see. I don't know how real and frequent that is, but we can be that way.

[16:55] Does that move any father to say, I'm done with this one? He used to talk so well, now he doesn't. He used to love me so openly, but now he doesn't.

Well, we would never do that with our children. And so when we pray and we read and we're distracted by a hundred things, this God just is done with us.

Well, listen to William Bridge here. He's an old Puritan. He said this, a father has a son whom he loves and this child is crazy-brained.

Yes, that's old Puritan language. He's out of his mind. Crazy-brained. But he has his clear periods. And he will speak very good reason sometimes. His father loves to hear this child speak when he speaks reason.

But all on a sudden, the child is out of his senses. What then? Does his father hate him for that? No. But the bowels of his father's heart aches over this child whom he takes pleasure in.

[18:05] Thus it is between God and your soul. Now distractions, dullness, those should be things that humble us because they never should be.

There's enough in God to keep us happy and alive. It's only our sin that makes God something dull. It's only our sin that makes it so we have nothing to say. We have nothing to ask.

We feel dead inside. It is our sin. It is a reason to be humbled. But it is not a reason to be downcast as if you're thrown off forever because he is a good father and he loves you dearly.

And so in those moments of that dryness and that dullness and it doesn't feel like you have much to offer to God, remember that you stand in grace and you are God's child and he loves you and there's greater patience in his heart than there is sin in your heart.

Your spiritual sickness moves him to pity. Your confusion moves him to mercy. His compassions never fail.

[19:14] Never fail. So don't be discouraged. Now I have two practical points and then I'm done. Practical point number one is this, is that you need to be careful and we all need to be careful that we don't mistake our eternal welfare with our present feelings.

We need to be careful that we don't mistake our eternal welfare with our present feelings. Do you feel all dead inside? No taste? No hunger? Don't mistake how you feel at that moment with how things ultimately stand between you and God.

Some, I'll be honest, some Monday mornings I hardly feel like a Christian at all. Tired and the world is gloomy and everything looks bad and my devotions are just blah.

It's true. That's how I feel. Is that how it is between God and I? I hope not. It is amazing.

Put a good breakfast in me, let me go for a walk and things start to look better. I start to feel better. That's just one morning and I'm not saying that it's that simple for everyone.

[20:45] But the principle is the same. Has it been weeks or months? it's been weeks or months since you've really found sweetness in your spiritual life.

And that's really starting to worry you. I want to say good. I'm glad that it's starting to worry you because that's a sign of life.

If it's no concern, if it's no loss, if there's no feeling of Psalm 42 where you're saying this is not what I want, well then there's no spiritual life. But if there is that, if your heart is tracking with Psalm 42 and 43, that's a sign that you're alive.

But I want to say more than that, there are dry periods. There are dark periods. There are hard periods where the feelings are not there.

It's true. And I think God is teaching us in those moments that we live by faith, not by feelings. We live on Jesus Christ, not on what we can offer because now here we are, we hardly have anything to offer.

[22:00] We need to remember we stand on God's grace. We trust again in Jesus Christ. Remember that my standing with God is because of Him and not because of what I'm doing.

I think these dry, dark periods can be real periods of strengthening our faith and our reliance on Jesus Christ.

So they come. They come because God wants us to lean more heavily upon Him. But again, don't equate your present feelings with your eternal state. Secondly, don't give up.

Don't give up on those disciplines. Don't give up reading. Don't give up praying. Don't give up coming to listen. I understand we want to say, yep, that was worth it.

We want to go and we want to have that instant we're fed with the Word of God or I prayed and I felt it right away. I felt heard and I felt like I was speaking. We want those things and I understand how it can be easy to say, I'm not getting that, so what's the point?

[23 : 11] But I just want to say don't give up on your disciplines. Don't quit trying to pray. Don't quit trying to read. Don't quit trying to go to church. Especially now. Especially now.

Because those are the very things that will help. What does a dry, dead soul need but the living God? The French have a saying that the appetite comes in the eating.

You know what they're saying? Sometimes you're not hungry but then you start to eat and then you, oh, this is pretty good and you start to eat. Same thing spiritually.

Sometimes praying, reading, listening to sermons. They don't have the life that we're after. But you know, there's no light there. There's no life there.

But the spark comes as you're doing it. The light comes. the fire comes. When you're, you're working with the matches.

[24 : 14] So, if you're cold and you're, it's dark and after two or three things with the matches, do you give up? Say, no, the matches don't work.

No, you keep going because it says you keep trying that it happens. preaching, reading, praying, meditating.

These are all ways that we have to learn to wait upon the Lord. There are ways that we do wait on Him. And I just want you to remember the Lord waited on you a long time.

and I think you can wait for Him. Keep waiting and holding on to Jesus. And just remember, feelings do change.

There's restoration. The Lord restores my soul. There's restoration after dryness. Feelings change, but God's love is unfailing. There's ups and downs.

[25 : 21] But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So hold on to Him. Wait upon the Lord. And keep, keep going.

Keep at it. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank You that You do not change.

Lord Jesus, we thank You that You don't change either. You are the same yesterday, today, and forever. The Savior that You were is the Savior that You are.

I just pray for my brothers and sisters who are struggling with dryness, with this discouragement, help them to see and know that they are not alone.

This is not some strange thing that has come upon them, but in Your providence, in Your wisdom, You are doing this. And I pray that You would give them a willing heart.

[26 : 28] Sustain them. Give them that steadfastness. Please teach them perseverance. And I pray that in Your time, and may it be soon, that You would restore the joy of their salvation.

Give them a renewed sense of Your presence, a renewed sense of the joy of fellowshiping with You.

Lord, thank You for Your great mercies for us today in providing all that we need. Pray that You would send us on Your way, on our way with Your blessing. I ask this in our Savior's name, our great High Priest, Jesus.

Amen.