Psalm 42 and 43
Hope for dry and drowning souls

We're going to look at two psalms, in fact they're probably one psalm, linked by a phrase that keeps repeating, and it won't take you long to spot it. And the reason I want us to look at these is because the psalmist is very open about going through some stuff that many of us will recognize in our own lives.

Psalm 42-43

Now that opening is beautiful, isn't it: 'As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.' Beautiful, and yet it's coming from a heart full of anguish. So much anguish in fact that others have called what he's going through 'spiritual depression.' Just listen again to that phrase that he repeats three times: 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?' He's down, he's seriously down, he's lost his bearings and he feels lost, and the world seems dark around him. And yet, by the end, he's turned the corner and light dawns in his darkness. And because many of us know what he's going through, this heaviness of heart, this inner turmoil, I want us to see what we can learn from him. I want us to see how he starts, what's wrong with him; then how it ends, which as we'll see is much better than how he starts; and then what makes the difference between the two. So, three points: his condition; his recovery and his cure.

His Condition
So, the psalmist says that he feels like a deer panting for flowing streams. And you might hear that and have this picture of beautiful countryside and this graceful deer, bending down to drink water from a babbling brook.

But just ask yourself, how does this man know what a deer, panting for thirst looks like? Why is that an image imprinted on his brain? And one answer to that is that he has seen a deer being hunted, and this hunted animal, near exhaustion in the chase, desperately needs a drink. And this man knows what it feels like to be hunted. To be hunted and haunted by his thoughts and by his enemies. Now, it could also be that he's simply seen a deer desperate for water in a drought, but which ever it is, he's seen and knows the power and pain of thirst in a deer, and he is as desperate as that for God: v2, 'my soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?'

And just as a deer, or you and I will die for lack of water, so our souls will shrivel without God and the feeling of his presence in our lives. And this guy longs for that, he's desperate to know God's intimate presence once again, he's desperate to know that God is there and close and listening, and he knows that that and that alone will settle his heart.

And yet at the moment when he seems to most need him, God is conspicuous by His absence. 'When shall I come and appear before God?' When will I feel his presence, when will I know the smile of his face, when will He comfort me with that sense that He's there?

So, this guy is thirsty for water for his soul, but all he gets is the bitter water of tears. V3, 'My tears have been my food day and night.' So, whatever is behind all

this is affecting him physically as well as emotionally: he's off his food, he's lost his appetite, the only thing he's eating and drinking are his tears, and he's not sleeping.

So, what is behind all this? What is behind his inner turmoil?

Well, firstly he's got enemies, and those enemies are taunting him. V3 again: 'my tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"' Verses 9 and 10, 'Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? 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?"'

Now, for him, these enemies are real people, they're mocking him and ridiculing his faith, and it's got under his skin. Their barbed comments hurt him, they cut him to the bone. And the reason they cut deep is because, deep down, he's wondering whether they're right. They're saying 'ha, where's your God now?' and he's wondering the same, v9: 'I say to God, my rock: why have you forgotten me?' Where are you God?

Now like him you might feel the sting of real physical enemies, like a work colleague who, putting it bluntly, is a nasty piece of work, who makes your life a misery, who has it in for you; and even if they don't verbalise it, you can feel the sneer. Or it might be the cumulative voice of the media and our culture which mocks the Christian faith, or it might simply be that quiet, insidious little voice of darkness that whispers doubts into your heart. Whichever it is, we all at times experience this, 'where is your God?' If God loves you, why does he let this happen to you? If God is really there, why doesn't he answer your prayers? If this is your life, then where's God in it all?

And as we listen to those voices, we have this growing sense of disquiet in our souls; as we give those voices airtime, this cloud of spiritual depression can settle over us, and we're left thinking, 'yeh, where are you God? Why have you forgotten me? If you're there, why don't you act?'

But there's another reason why this man feels so low. V5: 'My soul is downcast within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon.' Now the land of Jordan and Hermon are up in the north of Israel, whilst Jerusalem, which is where he wants to be, is in the South. And being stuck up north is a very good reason for feeling depressed and hopeless, as anyone who's ever been to the north of England can tell you; which is why so many northeners, including our very own assistant pastor, head south.

But whilst it may not be geographical there are a multitude of practical, real-life-issue reasons that leave you feeling low. And he feels a long way from home, and a long way from God. In fact, the physical circumstances of his life leave him feeling deserted by God. And it just seems like things are going from bad to worse. In fact he feels like he's drowning.

Now, some of my scariest moments have involved water. Last year we took the girls up to Bern, and we all jumped in the river Aare, and if you've never done it it's great fun and you walk upstream, jump in and get carried along by the current and climb out a bit further down. Except we went when the river was in full flood, and we hadn't seen the warnings that it was at dangerous levels. And so when we came to the steps where we were supposed to climb out, they were all submerged underwater, as were the bars you were supposed to hold onto. And with this river tearing along around us, we had to stick our heads under the water and pull ourselves along the poles. And I have never been so scared in my life. It felt like we were going to drown and I seriously thought we might lose one of the girls.

Then there are those moments surfing in the sea, and you get caught by one of these wonderful bone-crushing waves, which are great, unless you get turned over by one, and dragged under and it feels like you're in a washing machine and you don't know which way is up and which is down.

And the psalmist is saying, yes, and that's what my life feels like, I feel like I'm drowning: v7, 'Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.' Really, all of them? Everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong? Well, it can feel like that, can't it? As though it's one thing after another, as if nothing worse could happen. Interestingly, it's the same verse that Jonah quotes to himself as he sinks below the waves in his near drowning experience; and when things are bad you can feel like you're sinking under them.

It's a far cry from the streams of God that he longs for in v1, isn't it? He longs for God, he knows that it's only God who can satisfy his heart, but instead of cool streams, he's in danger of being swept away by a torrent. But just look how he describes it: 'all *your* breakers and *your* waves have gone over me.' And at first it may seem dubious comfort, but when you realize that whatever happens to you is in God's ultimate sovereign control, that ultimately these are his waves and breakers, then you can hope.

But for now, the psalmist just feels abandoned. In fact he feels like God has pushed him away, 43:2, God, 'why have you rejected me?' His fears, his enemies, his circumstances all seem much more real than God; they loom larger than God, and it all has this dark and depressing and despairing effect upon him. As he repeats three times (42:5, 11; 43:5): 'why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?' His soul is cast down, it's in turmoil. His sense of inner peace and poise has gone, he's stewed up, his appetite is gone, his sleep is disturbed, he feels dry and parched, God seems a million miles away, and he feels like he's drowning under it all. And you don't have to have been a Christian long to know something of what he's talking about.

Well, if that's all there was, it would make for a pretty depressing story wouldn't it? And yet he doesn't stay in this pit of despair. By the time we get to Psalm 43 things are beginning to turn.

His recovery
Now the first thing to say about his recovery, his end state, is that there are no sudden changes. He doesn't go from being in a spiritually dark hole one minute, to swinging from the chandeliers the next. Rather what we get is first glimpses and then some pretty clear indications that things are beginning to turn around. And yet throughout, there's no indication that his actual situation has changed. The enemies are still there, he's still facing the same difficulties, and yet there is this lifting of his spirits and the dark cloud of his depression begins to disperse, and he moves from near despair to a sense of strong confidence in God.

In verse 2 he describes God as 'the living God', which is absolutely true, nothing wrong with that; but by verse 8 it's become much more personal, and God is now 'the God of my life.' In v3 he spends his days and nights sleepless and weeping, but by v8 he can say, 'By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me.' He feels like he's drowning and God is absent, but by v9 he reaches out in the dark sea of despair and finds himself clinging to 'God, my rock' and once more he's on solid ground.

Then in 43:3 he speaks out his confidence that God will indeed allow him to enjoy his presence again, 'Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.' You see, the light is dawning in his darkness and He knows that God's light and the truth of His word is going to guide him up and out of the pit. And by verse 4 he can say, '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.' The man who knows sorrow and inner turmoil, who has felt as if God has abandoned and rejected him, is now speaking of God as his exceeding joy. Not, note, that God is the *source* of his joy, but that He is His joy. This God who he feared had abandoned him, and left him, is the very one he now rejoices in.

But here's what I want you to see this morning: none of this happened by chance. This transformation in how he sees things, this lifting of the darkness, didn't just happen.

His Cure
Well, the first thing we can say in his steps to recovery is that ***he brings it into the open.*** He could have just put on a brave religious face, and tried to pretend that a good Jew like him didn't feel like this. He could have hidden all this away. But he doesn't. He acknowledges, he admits, he confesses even that this is the way he feels. You see, hopelessness and spiritual depression and the whispers of the enemy, thrive in darkness; they're like some mould multiplying at the back of some dark cupboard; they're like rats gnawing away in the darkness of the cellar. But their controlling power over us can begin to be broken when we let the daylight in, when we bring these issues up into the light. And that may be by simply acknowledging this to yourself and to God, or it might be telling a trusted friend. But honesty and openness, admitting this is you, this is what you are struggling with, is the first step to recovery.

But he doesn't stay there. He could just admit that this is the way he feels and descend into endless navel gazing and be consumed by 'woe-is-me-that-I-feel-this-way!' and have his own little pity-party.

But he doesn't stay in the pit of pity he takes a second step to recovery and ***he starts to talk to himself***. Now, I know that sounds odd, that the way to renewed spiritual health is to talk to yourself, because we think talking to yourself is the first sign of madness, don't we? Su and I took the bus into Lausanne the other day, and I sat down next to this chap, and no sooner had the bus got going than he started muttering to himself and groaning out loud, and that's when I realized why the seat next to him was empty, and I immediately felt a bit nervous.

But here is the psalmist and he's talking to himself. He starts, as Martyn Lloyd Jones the Welsh preacher put it, to take himself in hand. He speaks directly to his soul: v5 again, 'why are you downcast, 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.' And he does that three times.

You see, when we feel this spiritual depression come over us, and circumstances of life press in and God seems absent, we tend to listen to ourselves rather than talk to ourselves. We listen to the pain and the sorrow, and we allow our feelings to dictate to us, rather than dictate to our feelings. We allow our inner man to talk to us, rather than talking to it. We allow the disquiet and the depression and the sadness of our souls to speak, rather than speak to our souls.

But the psalmist does the opposite: he starts speaking to his soul. And he tells himself some specific things. He reminds himself that life has not always been like this, that he has known God's favour and presence in the past in the goodness of the community of God's people; that this is not him imagining it; that this hunger and thirst he feels for God tells him that God is real.

But most importantly, he directs his soul to God: 'come on soul, hope in God, put your trust in him, take your eyes off yourself and fix them on God and his steadfast love for you, and days of joy will come again.'

You see, this is not navel gazing introspection; and he doesn't condemn himself and criticize himself. But neither does he leave the field of battle to the dark voices in his head. He takes the battle to his soul. He encourages himself, he talks rather than just listen. There's almost this defiance in the face of enemies and fear.

So, if you know what this guy is going through, yes, the first step is confession and realization, but the second is to start preaching the gospel to yourself. Remind yourself of Jesus; speak to yourself of God the Father's love for you, that he promises never to leave you nor forsake you. Remind your soul that he is sovereign and nothing can happen to you without a loving fatherly purpose. Take your soul to the cross and look again that this is how much God loves you that Jesus would die for you. Take the walk to the empty tomb and remind your soul that Christ is risen and sin and death are vanquished and that all will be well. Tell

your soul that if this is how much God loves you it doesn't matter what your enemies say or do to you. Don't be a silent listener to the doubts and fears: rather start speaking the truth and preaching the gospel to yourself.

And just note, even when the psalmist is on the mend, and his head is back up, and he's talking of God as his exceeding joy, even at the end of Psalm 43, he's still talking to himself, he's still reminding himself where to look, because every day is a battle, isn't it?

But he doesn't just talk to himself. The third step he takes to recovery is that ***he talks to God***. This man prays. Despite feeling abandoned by God, he still prays to him. And his praying is wonderfully honest. Verse 9, 'I say to God, my rock: "why have you forgotten me?"; 43:2: "You are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me?"

You see, it's not wrong to ask God 'why?' is it? Jesus cried out from the cross, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' There is a 'why?' of faith, that looks to God your rock and your refuge for the answer. And sometimes you might get an answer, it might become clear as to why God is allowing you to go through what your are going through – what lessons for your heart and life there are to learn; or like Job you may never get an answer, but as you speak to your soul and speak to God, instead, like Job, you may be overwhelmed by His majesty and His love for you. That in your 'why' you hear the echo of Jesus' 'why' upon the cross, that he was utterly forsaken that you might never be forsaken, that all the waves and breakers went over him, so you might know a solid rock under your feet when it feels like you're drowning.

But he doesn't just question God, he also goes to God in prayer for his vindication: 43:1, 'Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause.' He knows that ultimately the only opinion that really matters is God's. So rather than defend himself, he asks God to fight his corner. And when we feel under attack, maybe at work, or sadly even at home, there can be this inner drive to defend ourselves. And sometimes that might be right and necessary, but at other times it's just our pride and it can make this inner turmoil worse. And so the psalmist puts his reputation, for what it's worth, into God's hands. And trusts him to do the vindicating. And God will do a much better job of that, if he so chooses, than you or I could ever do.

But there's one last thing we can learn from this man on his road to recovery: ***He knows the value of communal worship.*** He remembers in v4 'how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise.' And he ends in Psalm 43 looking forward to God leading him back to the temple, v4, '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.' You see, if this spiritual depression thrives in the darkness, it also thrives in loneliness and isolation. And sometimes we need others to help lift us out of the pit; sometimes we need to hear the saints next to us singing to loosen our tongues. And this man's thirst is not simply for intimate, personal quiet times on his own, he wants

to be back among God's people. He longs for corporate worship, because that is where he knows he will encounter God and feel his smile upon his face.

So when times are hard, and your soul is disquieted and cast down, come to church, resist the temptation to withdraw, and join a homegroup. Cultivate friendships, invest in them. You see, the Bible knows nothing of the lone ranger Christian. And love for God always, always translates into love for his people.

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.'