

Why Art Thou Cast Down?

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“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (Ps 42:11).

In the psalm before us, the soul is in the very depths of distress — deep calleth unto deep. Yet the one whose experience is here set forth was not one of the most wicked men on earth — far from it. He can say, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?” Yet he has to say, “My tears have been my meat day and night.” His soul is cast down and disquieted. He declares, “All Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over me.” So great is his anguish that it is as if a sword pierced his bones. All this comes upon one who is godly.

How the Soul Rallies

But how does he regard these afflictions? Does he say, “This is all I get for seeking God?” On the contrary, he seeks to rally his soul to hope and praise. Let us see how this man carries himself under this weight of trial (surely greater than that experienced by most of us), and as we watch him closely, it may be we shall learn some deep lessons and come to regard our own sorrows and sufferings in a clearer and calmer light.

When his soul is cast down and when God seems to have forgotten him, with enemies reproaching him and their continual jeer ringing in his ears, “Where is thy God?” (Psalm 42:3,10), this is what he says to himself: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise Him” (vs. 5).

Although the sorrows and the trials continue, he repeats this to himself, and continues to address his soul in this hopeful and inspiring language. (See vs. 11.) Here is a divine balm, calculated to dispel all worry and to prevent its reappearance. Let us repeat it over and over again until we cease to fear and fret. “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him.”

How much these words suggest. First of all, they imply that we may not be able to help feeling depressed when something disastrous occurs. In our infirmity we may no more be able to help a first sensation of pain and depression than we can help staggering under the impact when some heavy person runs suddenly upon us. The great concern is, does hope or despair succeed after the first shock? Do we challenge our soul as the Psalmist does his? “Why art thou cast down? Why art thou disquieted?” Is our hope in God? Do we say, “I shall yet praise Him”? It makes all the difference whether we nurse our sorrow as a grievance or not, and also whether our gaze is intent on the grief or on God. Think over again all that this man had to endure: “My tears have been my meat day and night.” “O my God,” he says, “my soul is cast down within me.” He speaks of God’s waterspouts and God’s waves and billows. He had to bear oppression and reproach. He is no novice in the school of suffering and discipline. May we not think of him as one who has passed through the whole curriculum of painful experience in its acutest form and taken his degree? And he says to his own soul, and to yours, “Hope thou in God.” Yes, hope, and that in the anticipation of being yet able to praise. Has he not a

right to speak to you? Can your affliction be greater than his?

What a perfectly human, as well as divine, document is this psalm! Who does not know the meaning of being “cast down” and “disquieted”? Very few are exempt from such experiences. The Apostle Paul, even with all his power of intellect and strength of character, was not immune from times of depression. His language in one place implies that he was cast down, but he adds, “God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us.” If we know the one (and who does not?), we may also know the other. How wonderful that it should be characteristic of God’s ways to comfort those that are cast down! How many from various causes are in this mood? Yet God is not too busy to attend to you, if you require His comfort. He cares for you as if He had no one else to care for. He loves you as if He had no one else to love.

This Psalm Expresses Christ’s Experience

Great comfort is to be found in the thought that the Lord Jesus Christ was not exempt from this experience. This very psalm contains expressions descriptive of what His own soul passed through. He above all men could say, “My tears have been My meat day and night, while they continually say unto Me, Where is Thy God?” For was He not the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief? Especially verse 7 may be applied to Him. “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of Thy waterspouts; all Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over Me.” No one could say this as He could. Yet, at the same time, whoever panted after God as He did? All this reminds us how perfectly able He is to enter into what we are feeling, however deep the anguish.

*“He knows what sorest trials mean,
For He has felt the same.”*

Could anything yield greater comfort than the thought that there is a man upon the throne, seated above the highest heaven, who has felt every trial and faced every trouble that belong to human experience, and who is qualified to succor and sympathize? “Blest be the sorrow, kind the storm” that drives us to Him. And verse 8 was as true of our Lord as any of the other verses. His trust was always perfect, His faith never shaken. He did not complain, however bitter the cup or heavy the burden.

Sustained Day and Night

“Yet the Lord will command His loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with Me, and My prayer unto the God of My life” (vs. 8).

He knew God’s love, and that sustained Him. “Therefore doth My father love Me,” He could say, “because I lay down my life.” “His song” was with Him in the darkest night — even the night of unutterable anguish, the night of the dark betrayal and Gethsemane. He could sing in the face of all that was to follow. Nor was prayer ever wanting unto the God of His life. Thank God, His experience of His Father’s comfort may be ours.

“The Lord will command His loving-kindness the daytime.” Such are the words which come in the midst of this psalm of anguish. Sometimes He commandeth and raiseth up the stormy wind, and it seems as if nothing but desolation and disappointment came into your life. But wait, and He will also command His loving-kindness. In Psalm 78 we read, “He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by His power He brought in the south wind.” What a contrast there is between these two — the east wind and the south wind. If you have been experiencing the former then expect the latter — “By His power He brought in the south wind.” God’s love is the best thing He has, and He puts that at your service. His loving-kindness waits on you! He who can command angels and they shall minister to you, and who can bestow every good gift, commands that which contains within itself all good gifts and all ministries — His loving-kindness; that shall attend you — that shall be shed abroad in your heart. Just at the bitterest moment, all the sweetness of it shall be yours. Just at your weakest moment, all its strength shall be yours. Just at the moment when you are ready to despair, all its hope shall be yours. Just at the worst, God will reveal to you His best. He will command His loving-kindness in the daytime. He will command as He did of old, and the water of affliction shall become the wine of joy, and at the last you will be able to say, “I will mention the loving-kindnesses of the Lord and the praises of the Lord.”

A Song in the Night

“And in the night His song shall be with me.”

“His song.” What must that be like? the song of the Infinite? The song of endless millenniums? The song that never had a beginning and will never have an end. “When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy,” that was not even the commencement of it. It is the song of creation, of redemption, of coming glory. It is the song of songs. Is His song with you? and in the night? It was at night the shepherds heard the angels saying, “Glory to God in the highest.” But this is His song. Have you heard it? Have you learned it? It is the song of Christ. “In the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee.” It is the song of resurrection. Death is vanquished, the night disappears, and the resurrection morn has dawned. If His song is with you, there can be no fretting — you cannot be downcast. You will catch the strains of that triumphant note, and as He sings you will sing. But it is “His song” not your song; ours is only an echo of His. And if sleep will not come to your eyelids, something better will come, for if His song is with you, your heart will be merry though it is night and you are alone.

Thus we have day and night — the complete round of our life. Loving-kindness in the daytime. His song at night. What a contrast to verse 3. “My tears have been my meat day and night.” What an exchange — loving-kindness and song for tears!

Real Prayer

And then what comfort is found in those other words. “My prayer unto the God of my life.” How real prayer becomes with the recognition of this fact, that God is the God of our life. To recognize that our life belongs to Him — that He holds it, superintends it, fashions it, orders and arranges it, takes an interest in everything that belongs to it — will make all the difference

to our prayers. "My prayer unto the God of my life." How individual this is and how intensely personal! Just as truly is He the God of my life as if I were the only one living on earth. And the connection of prayer with this fact delivers us from every fatalistic tendency. I pray to Him about my life — tell Him all my hopes and fears, my questions and desires, my joys and sorrows, my strivings and struggles, my defeats and victories, my aims and efforts — and so my life is to a certain extent the result of my own praying, as well as of His fashioning. My prayers make a difference.

What a grand life this psalm reveals to us! It is full of pathos, full of anguish — "Deep calleth unto deep" — but it is also full of God, and what He is to the soul that knows Him. Are there any "deeps" in our life? There must be if our experience is to be deep.

Deeper Desire

But, for this blessed experience to be ours, three things are necessary:

First, we must be able to take up the language of verses 1 and 2. Our soul must pant after God, thirst for God, long for God's presence. The line of all true progress is indicated here. Only as we come to a fuller knowledge of God and a deeper desire after God are we making true progress. So often we are content with being saved simply from punishment. We think of Christ's death as a means of escape from hell, and as a passport to heaven, and that is all, or nearly so. No wonder our experience is shallow, and our Christian life unsatisfactory. Christ died, not merely to save us from punishment, but to save us from sin, and above all, to reveal God to us, that we may be truly holy and truly happy. It makes all the difference to our life as Christians whether we view His death from the one standpoint or the other.

Knowledge of God

It is this knowledge of God which the Bible everywhere puts before us as the supreme good. And nothing is really right with us until it is attained. God was always reminding His ancient people of this. (Read carefully Jer 9:23-24, Hos 6:6). The New Testament is full of the thought that the mission of Christ was to make God known. For this He lived and for this He died. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1:18). "No man knoweth who . . . the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him" (Luke 10:22). The Apostle Paul lays down the conditions of all true growth when he speaks of "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:10). Or, as it might be rendered, "Growing by the true knowledge of God." Again and again in his second epistle the Apostle Peter refers to the knowledge of God. (See chapter 1:2-3; 3:18). As we come to know God through the service and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, the effect will be to make us long after Him, as our Psalm describes. And what comfort such knowledge will be to us amidst all our earthly experience and how it will steady us amid life's discipline they who possess it know well.

The Presence of God

Second. We must live in the presence of God. The psalm we are dwelling upon frequently

speaks of this. The marginal rendering of certain words in verse 5 is, "His presence is salvation." To be continually in God's presence means constant deliverance, and it is a source of unfailing strength and joy. This is sometimes described as "the practice of the presence of God." Whatever we may understand by such a term, it represents a great truth. When God said to Moses, "My presence shall go with thee," He was offering him His best. In Psalm 80 three times over we have the words repeated, "Cause Thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (vss. 3, 7, 19). What is Israel's blessing at the end of Numbers 6, but the same thing? The shining of God's face means life and health and peace. And the promise in Ephesians 5:14, if we fulfill certain conditions, is that Christ will shine upon us. What comfort and joy are here guaranteed to us even though circumstances would cause the soul to be cast down and disquieted!

Accepting Discipline

And, lastly, if the experience of verse 8 is to be ours and we are to be cheered by God's loving-kindness and by His song, and our prayers are to have free play, we must know how to accept God's discipline and the trials that may come upon us. If we rebel or murmur, communion is at an end; we do not abide in His love, and consequently we lose our joy. Few things are more wonderful than such an experience as is unfolded in this psalm. Privation, affliction even anguish are experienced, yet the deepest trust and confidence in God are never for one moment absent. Indeed, the longing after God seems intensified as the agony grows deeper.

The psalm reminds us of the aphorism, "All's well that ends well," for it closes with a repetition of verse 5 — with the psalmist challenging his soul to hopefulness and praise. And in this respect the psalm is a reflection of the whole Bible, and of all God's ways. Nothing is clearer, nothing more certain, than that everything is to end well for God and His people. Instance after instance of this rises up before us. Both the promises of God, and the record of what men and women have already experienced, afford guarantee after guarantee that for the righteous it shall be well. Few lives on record have darker pages than the life of Joseph. Sold as a slave by the very men who should have loved and cherished him; slandered and wrongly imprisoned; the subject of ingratitude and neglect, until the iron entered into his soul — yet, few histories have a brighter ending. When made known to the very brethren who had hated and ill treated him, he is able to say to them, "Tell my father of all my glory in Egypt." He who had been so low as to be a slave and a prisoner ends at the very top of the ladder.

We read of Job, after all his vicissitudes, "The Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning." And the divine comment on his history from the pen of the Apostle James is "Ye . . . have seen the end of the Lord." The "end"! — that is what we must always wait for. What an end there is to the book of Ezekiel. Chapter after chapter unfolds the blackness of Israel's history and the calamities in store for them. Yet the closing statement is this: "And the name of the city from that day shall be, The Lord is there." Could anything be more full of promise or blessing? And how does the book of Revelation end — that book so full of human wickedness and divine judgment, of darkness and tempest, that we read — "Out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices"? Before it closes we are permitted to hear the music of the river of the water of life and instead of a world overwhelmed with judgment, the new heaven and new earth come into view, and the Bible ends in the very presence of earth's Sovereign and Lord ready to return and take possession. And how do the Psalms end? An

undercurrent of sadness and suffering — sometimes of bitterness and anguish — runs through many of them. In no writings, inspired or uninspired, do we find such expressions of pain and sorrow, and yet they end on the highest note conceivable. The last five all begin and end with “Praise ye the Lord.” All His angels; all His hosts; sun and moon, and stars of light: all above the earth, and all upon it, yea everything that hath breath, are called upon to praise the Lord. And so human agony ends at last in the universal harmony.

The Secret of True Happiness

May not each sorrowing one, then, who knows God, take up the language of our particular psalm and say “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.”

In this last sentence lies the secret of all true happiness and progress. Our spiritual health comes from contact with God. “They looked unto Him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed.”

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