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Psalms 42-43 "An Upward Look From a Downcast Soul" April 8, 2018

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 42 and 43. We are sure that these Psalms were written together. They have the same chorus. Verse 5, 6 and 11 of chapter 42, again chapter 43 ends in verse 5 with the same cry of the writer's heart. Also just to point out as we introduce these verses, notice that Psalm 43 does not have any superscription or header to it, which is an unusual occurrence in the Psalms. A lot of them have them. This second book of Psalms that begins here in chapter 42 and runs through chapter 72, all but two Psalms have no header: 43 and 71. So the subject matter of both of these Psalms is the same. It is the depression of the writer, the unsureness of his faith in God, the hope that he has had that doesn't seem to be delivering him, if you will. We've entitled this study this morning "An Upward Look From a Downcast Soul."

And notice in chapter 42 that the inscription there at the beginning says this is a contemplation of the Songs of Korah. The word "contemplation" in Hebrew is "maskiyil." It means to instruct or to teach. And this is the first of eight Psalms in a row, and there's 11 I think in all of the Psalms, that are given to the Sons of Korah.

Korah was a Levite. He was a cousin to Moses and to Aaron. But he wasn't a very good guy. In fact, when Moses came to power, it was he, Korah, who led a rebellion against his authority. Got a bunch of big names to join him. Talked to 250 kind of local overseers to challenge Moses as well. You can read about it in Numbers 16.

Moses went to pray, and the Lord says, I got this. And so the next morning the Lord came and said to the people, stand away from the tent of Korah, and Dathan and Abiram and their families. And everyone backed up, and the ground opened up and swallowed up their household and their families. And then the 250 that had organized to oppose Moses, there was a fire that came from the Lord and incinerated all 250 at once. That pretty much ended the revolt.

But their sons, the sons of Korah, turned out far better. By the time that you come to the days of David, these Levites were responsible for worshipping the Lord for His mercy. They were the guardians, if you will, of the camp of the Levites. They were over the tent of meeting. And when the temple would be built, they were actually primarily involved in worship. There was a fellow named Heman who was one of the three principal worshippers under the tutelage or under the oversight of David. He was a Korahite. He was also a descendant. And four of the 24 groups that worshipped

during the month at the temple came from the Songs of Korah. So they are prominent in the Psalms. It does appear like they didn't necessarily write the Psalms. They put them to music, though, and then taught them to others.

These Psalms in particular we're going to look at this morning, Psalm 42 and 43, appear to have been written by King Hezekiah. We say that because all the topics and worries and concerns match perfectly to the historical record of his reign. He reigned at a time in the southern kingdom of Judah when Isaiah was a prophet, and when the Assyrians had attacked the north, wiped them out in 722, spent 20 years just really demolishing everything north of Jerusalem, and then decided they would come to Jerusalem, surround it, take it out, in hopes of getting down to Egypt and ruling the world. So Hezekiah is the king during the time of the assault and the besieging of the city. You can read about it in 2 Kings 18 and 19, I think Isaiah 36, 2 Chronicles 32, I think.

Hezekiah's father Ahaz was a terrible guy. He made his foreign policy not by praying and seeking the Lord, but by just doing whatever he wanted. So when his boy came to the throne, he was a godly man. He made wholesale changes to the government. He actually dismissed an entire set of apostate priests. It brought the nation back closer to the Lord, but it didn't make the people necessarily happy. A lot of them remained skeptical and uncommitted, and yet Hezekiah's faith was strong. He believed that the Lord would take care of them, and so when this attack came, he was the first guy to stand and say, "We're not giving in to these guys even though we're outnumbered. We're going to trust the Lord, "Even though the armies of the Assyrians had besieged them and really were blocking any flow in and out of the town.

Now, during the time that all of this was taking place, Hezekiah, a fairly young guy, gets very sick. In fact, he's so sick that the Lord sends Isaiah the prophet to him and he says this to him: "Get your house in order. You're going to die." But Hezekiah doesn't take the news well. He rolls over in his bed, he turns to the wall, and he says to the Lord, "I'm not done here. You've given me this people to lead. We've just begun to make reforms. Now, we're under great pressure from outside. We could be overrun. I just feel like this is the place you've put me and I'd like to finish the work that you've started with me." And he begins to pray. And before Isaiah can even get in his chariot to leave, the Lord said to him, "Go back and tell Hezekiah he has 15 years." And so he walks in to Hezekiah and he says, "You've got 15 years." Now Hezekiah doesn't know what to believe. The prophet of God just told him two things in 20 minutes. So God has the sun stand still in the sky -- you remember the long

day -- so that He can prove to Hezekiah that He meant business.

Well, outside the walls -- so here's a guy with a fatal illness that he is being told he's going to survive, though he hasn't necessarily got up and run around yet, and then outside the wall he's got the Assyrian army. Brutal people. I mean, history tells us that they subjected towns and countries by intimidation. They would come into a city, haul out 20 or 30 people, cut off an arm or a leg, chop off a foot, send them back into the town and say, "Tell everyone that's going to happen to them if they don't give up." And you can imagine what happened. People gave up, a lot, and quickly so. And so they ruled through terror. And here's Hezekiah and he's ruling, these people. He's brought great reform and he's got them on track with the Lord, though not everyone's involved. In fact, most people don't like the changes. He's got Isaiah to stand with him. He's just recovering from a fatal illness, and he's got death waiting at the door. No food gets in, no food gets out. And you find Hezekiah's faith being shaken. He's a little nervous. What if the Lord doesn't come through? And the people around him are panicking.

So he writes these two Psalms. And four times he quotes that same question to himself, "Why are you so downcast, O my soul, within me? Why don't you hope in God? He's your hope. We're going to yet praise Him for His help." But that wasn't so easy for him. He was struggling with discouragement, with depression. He needed to deal with his outlook and his attitude. Solomon will write in the Proverbs, "As a man thinks, so he is." Paul will write to the Philippians, "Think on the things that are good and upright and that have value and that are strengthening and all." And here we find Hezekiah struggling. Whenever you find repetition in Hebrew, it is just like putting an exclamation mark in English. It is emphasis by repetition.

I don't know how often you fight depression or anxiety or discouragement. It can get pretty bad. But at least much of it, for most of us, without being diseased, is a matter of what we're thinking about, what we're believing, what we're embracing, and where our thoughts are. Here's a man, the king, Hezekiah, he's the spiritual leader of the nation. He's brought better reforms than anyone in their recent history. He's brought them back to the brink of faith again. And yet here's a man that is having to struggle with illness and with a people that aren't on board, and with little hope to support his faith, because the Assyrians are outside and they can wipe you out and they have no mercy at all. Would God deliver us or not? If I'm wrong, we're all dead. Because the cry at the wall was surrender or die, and he had just chosen to trust God. So out of these despairing kind of thoughts in that position as king, you hear his prayers borne in the furnace, crying out to God.

Verse 1 -- you knew we'd get this eventually, didn't you? -- "As the deer pants for the water brook, so pants my soul for you, God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I come and appear before God?" It does appear that in sickness Hezekiah had been unable to go to the temple, yet he longs for it with tremendous desire. He finds himself just longing for that fellowship with God and His people. I think in light of how many people make excuses for not going to church, we should pray that God would give all of us Hezekiah's heart. I've always been interested after 40 years of pastoring that we have to do three services on Sunday morning, but we can get away with one on Wednesday night. I don't know what that means, but I never liked my conclusions. God, give us a hungry heart. As a deer, a mountain deer, looking for water, so Hezekiah longed for the fellowship with God and that place of worship. "When can I appear before Him?" He writes in verse 3, "My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually are saying to me, where's your God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. I used to go with the multitude. We'd go to the house of God with voices of praise and joy, with a multitude that would keep a pilgrim's feast."

Hezekiah's reforms, like I said, in Jerusalem had not been popular. He had pulled the priesthood, he had put a lot of people out of work, he had called them to task. The people were not on board. His illness made him weak in the eyes of the people. The siege at the gates made him the object of scorn and accusation, and he quotes that now. I'm trying to hang in there and trust the Lord, and the people are now saying, where's God? I thought you said God was coming through. It was a long way from the joy that he used to feel and experience when he would go to the temple singing praises with the people. They used to be on the same page. There was lots of worship going on. It wasn't so anymore. He longed for the good old days. And so for the first time in four verses, he says in verse 5 to himself, "Why are you so cast down, o my soul? And why so disquieted within me? You should hope in God. I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance."

Whenever emotional or spiritual distress challenges your walk with God, I think it is wise to direct your thoughts to the truths of God rather than having your thoughts direct you to despair, or to somehow consider the life that could be had when God is removed from the scene. I know that he could never have answered -- at least from the historical books, he couldn't answer why he was so sick at such a young age. He couldn't explain why the Assyrians had decided to come from the north to now attack Jerusalem, that their words of threats of death were constant. But he said to himself, I should be trusting

God now and I'm not. Instead I'm disquieted, I'm discouraged, I'm depressed.

I think why I like this Psalm so much, and we have mentioned to you more than once, that the Psalms deal with present tense living. So they are borne from the life of people's experience and then they are applied to life itself. Here's godly Hezekiah, and indeed he's quite a guy in the lineup of kings. You know, he's a hero in Israeli history in the Old Testament, and yet here's a man that is up one minute and down the next. He is standing confidently on Tuesday and collapsing on Thursday. He's standing fast through the weekend, and then hanging on by a thread. And he's the kind of guy that we could relate to. He is struggling to trust God, he's having a hard time, and he's got plenty of reasons, plenty of things to point to that are pretty good arguments for why things have been so difficult.

He says in verse 6 again, "O my God, my soul is," declarative statement, "cast down within me. Therefore I will remember you from the land of Jordan to the heights of Hermon to the hills of Mizar. Deep unto deep, the noise of Your waterfalls and Your waves and Your billows have gone over me." Now, poetic books; right? These are the books of poetry and very poetically, he describes the horror that he's feeling. He's just overwhelmed. Death, threat of death, attack. The Bible says death is the last enemy, but it's an enemy. I think Spurgeon wrote one time, "Death is the last enemy. Leave it till last." In other words, don't worry about it until you're facing it. But great poetic style. He describes the terror that is overflowing him.

By the way, the Jordan begins in Mount Hermon, in the north, and it runs through the land and it dumps itself into the Dead Sea, where there's no life at all. It's just death. That's where it ends. That's where it terminates, until the Lord will fix that. That's exactly the way it runs today. So very poetic, but very true.

And so he fights back against this overwhelming feeling. He says in verse 8, "The Lord will command His loving-kindness in the daytime. In the night His song will be mine. A prayer to the God of my life." Overwhelmed, but also overcoming. Alone, and yet he knows God is with him. I'm going to trust the Lord. I get 15 more years. Isaiah had delivered the bad news before he delivered the good news. So he takes a stand, he tries to fight, but he's having a hard time. He says in verse 9, "I will say to the God who is my Rock, why have You forgotten me? And why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemies? As a bone breaks, my enemies reproach me, all day long they say to me, where's your God? Why are you so cast down, o my soul? Why are you so disquieted within me? Hope in God. I

shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God." I will trust He's my rock, but no one's telling me He is. In fact, everyone's questioning where He's gone. For the second and the third time here, verse 6 and then verse 11 now again, Hezekiah speaks to himself. As a man thinks, so he is. What are you doing? Why aren't you trusting God? Takes himself to task. He says of himself, I know that praise time is coming, and that it's going to be all right. But it isn't all right.

So vindicate me, verse 1, O God. Plead my cause against an ungodly nation; deliver me from the deceitful and the unjust man." The word "vindicate" means to clear; right? He had had outwardly confidence in God. He, as the leader, told the people, "We're not surrendering. God is going to deliver us." But the wicked rulers and those around him and with every passing day, the propaganda was moving the nation away from a trust in God and away from Hezekiah, who asked the Lord now in prayer, vindicate me. I've told everyone you're going to come through, so come through. Don't leave me hanging out here.

The enemy at the gates. The king of Assyria at the time was a fellow named Sennacherib, but he had a guy named Rabshakeh that was kind of his mouthpiece, and he came to the gates of Jerusalem and he began to yell up to the people in Hebrew, "Don't trust God. And don't trust your king, who says he trusts God. Think about it. We have wiped out literally everything north of you over the last two decades, and they all trusted in some god, and they all fell to defeat. No god stands against us. You don't give up, you die." And the people started going, well, that makes sense to me. We should give up. Except Hezekiah and Isaiah. We're not giving up. We're trusting God.

But in the midst of trying to stand by faith, emotionally and psychologically there was a tremendous strain upon his life, a fight within that he needed to just stand and face the reality of things. And, what if I'm wrong? In fact, in verse 2 he says, "You are the God of my strength. Why do you cast me off and why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy?" It wasn't getting better, it was getting worse. At some point in this siege the people started thinking about eating their own children. It had gotten that bad.

Sennacherib, who is the king, had been pulled away from the siege to fight another battle, but before he left, and he left plenty of troops there, he sent a letter to Hezekiah detailing in writing what he'd been yelling over the gate. You know, "You got one last chance. This is it. I come back, that's it. We annihilate you." Hezekiah took the letter, and according to 2 Kings 19, he took it with Isaiah and he laid it before the Lord at the tabernacle and he said, "Lord,

this is what they're saying about You. This is what they're threatening us with. God, what are you going to do?" And Isaiah the prophet, moved by the Lord, spoke up and he said, "This is what the Lord God of Israel says to you: Because you've prayed to Me against Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, I have heard you." And if you read 2 Kings 19, down towards the end of the chapter you read that one night as the people were going to bed and weeping, having no food, that an angel of the Lord came outside and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers by Himself in one night. And in the morning when they woke up, everyone outside the gates were dead or gone. More than he could have hoped for. But he didn't know that now. All he knew was everything looked tragic and impossible to overcome: A fatal illness that he supposedly was going to get well from, an enemy that seemed like he had all the power and was in the driver's seat, and now he finds himself just crying out in verse 2 to God, How long are You going to have me wait? How long are You going to put this off?

I truly believe as an example that Israel was saved because Hezekiah and Isaiah believed God. They just stood fast when everything said give up. If we carry that forward, I truly believe America can be saved if the church prays. I think about Lot. Lot was so powerless in his walk with God that when it came to God's judgment upon Sodom, the best he could do was leave, walk away. But I think if the church prays, America can be turned. It's going to take your prayers and mine. That's all it takes. And I watch Hezekiah here and Isaiah. There's such -- they're so isolated in terms of numbers. And yet it only take a few, doesn't it?

He prays in verse 3 that the Lord would send light and truth to him and lead him from the holy hill to the tabernacle. "Lord, I need direction. I need wisdom. I want to go to the altar of God, to God, who is my exceeding joy; and bring out my harp and sing praises, God." I want to -- I want to come back to worship. And then he says again for the fourth time to himself, "Why are you so downcast, my soul? Why are you so disquieted within me? Hope in God. I shall yet praise Him. He is the help of my countenance and He is my God."

A real sign of spiritual growth I think sometimes is being able to talk yourself into thinking what's right. I know a lot of times a lot of our suffering comes because we embrace a lie. Oh, we somehow treat it as the truth, but it is hardly the truth. And I see Hezekiah doing the same thing here. In fact, if you go read the story of the prodigal son, when he's sitting in the mire, you know what he does? He starts talking to himself. "You know, we don't have to be here. You know, your dad's servants at home get treated better than this. I bet if we go home and we repent, that there'll be an open door.

There'll be a place for me with Dad." And he just began to tell himself the truth. He admitted his own error. And you can watch Hezekiah ask himself, why are the -- why am I so discouraged? And it's almost like he puts on the table all that he was facing, and it was significant. Fatal illness, a war you can't win, and a people that have turned against you. You think you got reason to complain? I mean, this guy had it tough, and yet he says, trust in God, hope in God. I'm going to sing praises to Him one day. I'm going to take my instrument to church and I'm going to see my life changed because of who He is. And yet he saw none of it. He just had to by faith take a stand and believe Him. And like we said, God would eventually write on the doorstep. He would turn it around in one night, but that's harder to see.

So these four times, "Why are you so cast down, o my soul?" In modern English, why are you so depressed? Why are you so disturbed? Why are you so anxious? Why are those emotions racing through your mind. I don't think that we will necessarily get dragged through the same extreme testing that this man was, but it seems to me anything that upsets your faith and your hope is disconcerting, it's despairing, it's hopeless. And I know that at least in part, I suspect that we get some of that stuff because we -- we live pressure-filled lives.

I'm amazed at how busy people are. My schedule should be slowing down, but it's not. My wife said to me the other day, "Oh, next week's going to be busy." And this is my response: "Just tell me what we're doing tomorrow." I don't want to worry about Friday on Tuesday. What are we doing today? So busy. Work pressures, home pressures. Life pressures. You want stuff to worry about, just look around; right? And what may come tomorrow. What will tomorrow bring? We get so weary of what may be. Look at what happened to Hezekiah here. He is overwhelmed, according to verse 7 of the last chapter, with the ways of life. He said, "Your billows have just rolled over me." He and the nation he served might soon be feasted upon by a very heinous Syrian troop. He had been told no agreement, no surrender, then you die. And he said, then we die. That was his position. He believed God with all of his heart. But then God hadn't worked. He was dangling out there by faith. God hasn't acted. And all of the consequences would fall upon Hezekiah's shoulders. He had thrown it all in this one direction. So have we a lot of times, and so there's no way out. It's harder obviously when we have boasted about God's goodness and He hasn't come through.

According to verse 4 of the last chapter, he remembered better days. I remember what it used to be like. Isn't that interesting, because memories most often help us to solidify God's past faithfulness to remind ourselves that God will come through. But when you're

depressed, it works against you. It starts saying to you these kind of things: Will it ever be normal again? Will I ever be happy again? And you can read that in Hezekiah's words here as well. Add to that the taunts of the unbelievers, verse 3 and verse 10 of the last chapter, where the people come to him and say, hey, where is your god, Mr. Faithful Man?" Certainly for Christians, it can be a cause of real despair when we feel God has abandoned us and done so publicly in the eyes of our critics, who we have boasted to that our God is faithful, and now they mock our faith. In verse 9 of the last chapter, verse 2 of this present one, verse 2 of chapter 43, he says to the Lord twice, "Why are you not answering my prayers?" His circumstances continue to be inconsistent with what he believed about God. He feels like God had let him down. Why am I so discouraged? This is why I'm so discouraged. But the answer's pretty clear in every one of those four choruses, and the answer is this: You've got a hope in God. You've got to set apart, or in opposition to your feelings, the truth. The truth. Hezekiah takes himself by the hand, begins to wrestle through the emotions that are plaguing him and the feelings that are robbing him of peace, and he begins to confront his stand with the truths of God. Oh, he had every reason to argue; illness, attack, abandonment, and yet in his heart he knew deep down inside that God was able. He begins to talk to himself. You don't hear a lot of words of self pity. You don't hear the woe is me, and why is this happening to me, you know?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a book years ago on spiritual depression, and one of the lines that I like that he wrote, he says, "When you're depressed, you should deal with the fact that circumstances are talking to you, and instead we should talk to our circumstances." That wisdom for the depressed is to have a spiritual mind that speaks to the emotions, not the emotions that speak to the mind. And that's a biblical truth; right? You have to take yourself by the hand, address yourself, speak to the things that are bothering you, preach to yourself, question, if you will, your feelings. Take hold of yourself. You, of all people, you Christians, after all that you've learned and been taught, should be encouraged, not discouraged. But it's an important practice to reason with your own hearts when you find that your views or your fears or your outlooks are now conflicting with what God has to say.

Feelings are the natural response to outward circumstances, but feelings have to be passed through God's Word. I think that my emotions change with the changing situation. I have a burrito, I'm a happy man. The sun is out, things couldn't be better. God has a way of coming along and setting the thermostat and keeping the temperature level the same, despite the outward weather. Set up to peace, turn it to rest. God knows what He's doing. He'll finish

what He started. He does all things well. He's for you and not against you. You can count on Him. But you're going to have to go back to the truth, and when you're unsure, go back to the things you're sure of. "Why are you so disquieted, o my soul?" Why are you so bent over and bent down and agitated? And like I said, Hezekiah had compelling reasons to be anxious and worried, yet God had promised him more than that. And he was struggling to hang on to those things.

Hope in God. Get back on the high road. It's helpful. Practice what you preach. Hey, practice what I preach. Because sometimes my trust is misplaced. I trust man, and people can be helpful, but let's face it, they're unreliable at best and they're limited in power. Sometimes I trust in unfound hopes. I had a guy say to me, "Hey, I'm feeling pretty good." I said "Why?" He said, "I'm just thinking positive thoughts." Really? Is that what it is? Positive thoughts have no power with God, but His Word never fails.

So there's something to be said for redirecting your attention and getting your eyes off the trouble and getting your eyes back on the Lord. I know people say sometimes, well, that's easy for you to say. You don't know how I feel. Well, maybe not, but I'll tell you what: Hezekiah didn't get well overnight either. Four times in these 16 verses or 14 verses, he goes back to the same thing: Come on, man. Cheer up. It's almost like he got hold of it, he felt good for a little while, and then he fell right back into the pit. And he had to do it again, he had to do it again, he had to do it again. It's the way truth works.

In Judges Chapter 7 God takes from Gideon enough of his army when he was fighting the Midianites to know that there was no chance of him winning. He was reduced to 300 guys. They were fighting tens of thousands. And he despaired, because so often our discouragement comes when we see no way out. We'll all have great faith while we can figure out a way that God might get us out of it, but when you're out of ideas, when you've played your ace in the hole and you're still losing the hand, now it becomes a more difficult issue. So four times in two Psalms in 14 verses, Hezekiah has to go back to the same battle. Talk to himself about the unreasonableness of his surging emotions in light of the truth of God. Apparently it didn't take right away, but that's okay. You got to fight this battle every day.

Look, faith can boggle the logic of the mind, but the heart of faith has a logic all of its own. We don't see God, sometimes we don't feel God, but yet we know that He's there. And He has proven Himself in the history and prophetically and in His Word that we can trust Him. So for the fourth time Hezekiah said, just trust God. I know that singing's coming. And I love the end of the passage here. He

says in verse 5, "The Lord is my countenance, the help of my countenance and my God." The word "countenance" means face or appearance. The Lord will change my face. That's literally what that says. Right? A light heart makes a bright face. Moses came down from spending time with God, his face was lit up. Hannah prayed for years for a child, was so discouraged when she couldn't have one, and then one day the Lord spoke to her, I Samuel chapter 1, and she came away from the place of worship and it says she no longer had a sad countenance. Depression will show on your face, but so will His joy. Go back and read verse 5 of chapter 42 and it says, "It is the help of His countenance that changes then my countenance."

If I see His face, it will change yours. Pretty good. So keep your eye on His face, and then we'll enjoy looking at yours.