

Life In A Minor Key
Text: Psalm 42:1-11, 43:1-5
Series: Psalms [#10]
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Introduction

[Piano plays in a minor key; from Chopin's *Funeral March*.]

That is the sound and feel of a minor key. Most of us enjoy singing in a major key more than a minor. Only 27 songs in our hymnal are in a minor key. Can you imagine singing the *Doxology* in a minor key? It would sound like this. [Piano plays the *Doxology* in minor.] I can hear some of you thinking, "No! We want it in a major key!" [Piano plays the *Doxology* in major.]

Wouldn't it be nice if life were like that? We don't like the sound, the feelings of *life in a minor key*, so, just switch to a major key! But life isn't like that. From time to time, and even for long times, we experience low, gloomy feelings; skies filled with dark clouds rather than bright blue; feelings of not wanting to face another day; of being suffocated by an immovable weight bearing down on us; feelings of being in a long, pitch-dark tunnel without the slightest glimmer of light at the end. We desperately want it to end, to switch the light back on, to move into a major key. But we can't.

Then it is made worse if someone tells us "Just trust Jesus and He will take it away instantly and forever. These things don't happen to people who *really* trust God." If you ever have the misfortune of being on the receiving end of that, remember two things: One, they don't know what they are talking about. Two, they don't speak for God.

How do we know this? We look to trusting, godly people the Bible. When the people of Israel grumbled, Moses' life moved to a minor key. He told God

"I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. So if You are going to deal thus with me, *please kill me at once*, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness." (Numbers 11:14-15)

Elijah challenged and defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. But right after God gave him that great victory, when he heard that Queen Jezebel was out to kill him, he was afraid and ran away to the wilderness. He sat down under a tree and asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19:1-4).

There is one example we don't often cite because it is difficult to understand and raises questions that can be troubling. Just before Jesus was arrested, He prayed in the garden. He told Peter, James and John, "*My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death...*" (Matthew 26:38). As God the Son faced the weight and pain of bearing humanity's sin, of death on a cross, of the Father turning away and pouring out His wrath on Him, He experienced

feelings of deep grief to the point of death. While it is difficult for us to grasp, He felt engulfed by feelings of sorrow, drowning in feelings of grief.

In every generation some of God's great saints have had ongoing struggles with dark feelings. The reformer Martin Luther, the 19th century *prince of preachers* Charles Spurgeon and many, many, many others. There are different causes for these feelings—

- there can be physical causes within our bodies;
- there are situational triggers;
- there are psychological and emotional causes;
- there are spiritual causes.

And all of these are interrelated. The late Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was both a physician and a pastor, wrote

“You cannot isolate the spiritual from the physical for we are body, mind and spirit. The greatest and the best Christians when they are physically weak are more prone to an attack of spiritual depression than at any other time...”¹

So, for deep and protracted minor key experiences we can benefit from medical, psychological and spiritual help together.

Psalms 42 and 43 come from the pen of an unknown man who knew the pain and tears of being distant and disconnected from the familiar and, more than that, from God. He was disturbed, in despair, feeding on a diet of tears while enemies mocked him.

These Psalms describe and teach us about *life in a minor key*. The writer does not move into a major key or step out into the bright sunshine during the course of these verses. Nor does he give us a neat formula for righting the ship of our feelings. But through him God reveals some important guidelines for moving out of a minor and back into a major key. We begin with ...

The Picture Of Life In A Minor Key.

It opens with a problem. We see this clearly in the Psalm writer's experience. He was separated, removed, isolated. Look at 42:6.

“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.”

Turn to the maps at the back of your Bible. Find one that shows the territory of Israel. In the pew Bibles, find Map 3: *The Twelve Tribes Of Israel*. Find the Sea of Galilee in the north, and then look north from it to Dan. Northeast of Dan there is a range of mountains called Hermon. We don't know the location of Mount Mizar in that range. This is the far northeast

point of Israel. It was as far away from Jerusalem as you could be and still be in Israel. Whether the writer was speaking literally or figuratively, he describes being removed, separated and isolated from Jerusalem, the center of worship and God's people.

He also felt separated from and abandoned by God. Look at 42:9, "I will say to God my rock, 'Why have You forgotten me?'" In the second verse of Psalm 43 he writes, "For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?"

Another part of his problem was that he was taunted, ridiculed and oppressed. Go back up to 42:3. "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" People were saying, "You believe in God. You trust Him. You claim to be His friend. Well, look at you now! *Where is your God?*"

Then in verses 9 and 10 he writes of "'mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?' As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me." In 43:1 he continues, "Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!"

Sometimes when we feel depressed we might say, "I don't know why. I just feel down. It comes out of nowhere." It may seem that way, but there are causes, problems whether they be physical, emotional, situational, spiritual or some combination. Sometimes after a great experience or achievement we may experience a dull, discouraging let down. After we take a break from being on the go, we may go down into the dumps. When we experience disappointment or loss. When we drift away from or disobey God. When we drift away from people who are important to us—or they drift away from us. Life in a minor key opens with a problem.

Then, the opening movement and response can trigger more problems. While we don't know the first problems of the Psalm writer, the first ones we see in these Psalms are being physically separated, removed and isolated and being taunted, ridiculed and oppressed. Notice the development of other problems out of these. The problem of feeling separated from God and spiritually dry, as described in the familiar first lines of Psalm 42.

"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?"

He was in deep distress. In verse 6 he tells us "my soul is in despair within me." He felt weighed down, drowning in gloom and hopelessness. He also then felt battered by the noisy, destructive breakers that God allowed to crash down on him. Verse 7, "All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me."

If that were not already more than enough, there was desperation. Go back to 43:1.

"Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly
nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! For
You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?"

Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" (1-2)

The deceit and unjust abuse left him emotionally beaten up and bruised. These pleas and questions to God come out of his desperation.

Yes, the initial problems and our responses can trigger more problems. Feeling separated from God, spiritually dry, parched. Feelings of great distress. Feelings of desperation.

The final view of this picture I want us to see is that memories can be played in a minor as well as a major key. We play our memories, even our best memories, in a minor key when we dwell on, get stuck on the sorrow of losing what we once had but have no more; when we get locked in on our pain, the injustice that has been done to us and the sin and deceit of others. We play our best memories in a major key when we give thanks to God for them; when we use them to motivate us to move forward and through the present dark disaster to the bright light, song and life in a major key.

I see this Psalm writer as being very much like us. He played his memories in both major and minor keys. 42:4.

“These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For 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.”

It seems this was mix of nostalgic sorrow and steadfast hope because he went on to write,

“Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence.”

Then read the next verse. “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.” Again, it appears to me that this is a mix of nostalgic sorrow and steadfast hope, for in the next lines he writes, “Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; all Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.” (7)

The point is that we can use the memories of good times and things to perpetuate and deepen our dark feelings, or to keep us focused on the goal and moving forward. Now, let's move from the picture of life in a minor key to ...

The Process Of Moving From A Minor To A Major Key.

There are four principles in these Psalms which will help us. The first is to face and examine the truth about ourselves. This begins with admitting how you feel. Sometimes we don't want to admit to ourselves that our feelings are deeply troubled. After all, “I shouldn't feel this way.” “A good Christian wouldn't feel like this.” As well, it can be scary to come face to face with the depths of our feelings.

This Psalm writer faced and examined how he really felt. Look at 42:5. “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?” He repeats this in verse 11 and again in 43:5. This is important because we can’t deal with our troubled feelings unless recognize, admit and examine them.

Sometimes we need others to help us to do this. Martin Luther had been in a deep, black mood for three days. Finally his wife came to him dressed in her mourning clothes. “Who died?,” he asked. “God,” she answered. Luther was upset. “What do you mean ‘God is dead.’ God cannot die!” “Well,” she replied, “the way you have been acting I was sure He had!” He needed to be jolted into seeing his feelings accurately and in perspective to begin dealing with them.

Going back to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He wrote

“... we have to learn what the Psalmist [the writer of these two psalms] learned — we must learn to take ourselves in hand. This man was not content just to lie down and commiserate with himself. He does something about it, he takes himself in hand. But he does something which is more important still, that he talks to himself.”²

In talking to himself the Psalmist asked himself questions.

- Three times he asked himself “Why am I in despair?” (42:5, 11; 43:5).
- Three times he asked himself “Why am I disturbed?” (42:5, 11; 43:5).
- Two times he asked himself, “Why am I mourning?” (42:9; 43:2).

Yes, we need to face and examine the truth about ourselves.

Having faced the truth about ourselves we need to move on to focus on God and His blessings. The Psalm writer did not get stuck on an inward focus, but moved to an outward and upward focus on God. We see that in a number of his expressions.

- 42:8, “The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night.” He knew, as Jeremiah did, that God’s “lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is [His] faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23). He knew this was true, was true for him even in his darkest despair.
- At the end of verse 8 he tells us that God is “the God of my life.” God is the One who gives me life and sustains it, even when I have no hope.
- The next verse, “God, my rock.” When everything is crumbling and giving way, God is solid and unchanging. He is faithful to His promises and to me, even when I can’t feel it. I am secure in Him.

- 42:11, “The help of my countenance.” God is the only One who can truly change my outlook and circumstances.
- 43:2, “The God of my strength.” Yes, God is the all-powerful One. I am powerless, but He gives me strength to hang on, to endure, to move forward. That is the way God is. It is what He does. My circumstances and feelings don’t, can’t change that.
- 43:4, “God my exceeding joy.” This man was not jumping for joy at that moment. Far from it. But he knew the unchanging truth that true joy, *his* true joy, *his* shout of joy in the morning comes from God. He counted on that. He looked forward to that.
- Finally, four times—in 42:6, 11; 43:4, 5—he says “my God.”

You see, we cannot move forward to life in a major key without focusing on God and His blessings. So even in, especially in the toughest, darkest hours *sing the Psalms*, as hard as it may be to get going. Sing as King David did,

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.”
(Psalm 103:1-5)

Next, plan and take positive steps. Notice the positive plans and steps of the Psalmist:

- 42:5, “Hope in God, for *I shall again praise Him* for the help of His presence.”
- 42:11 and 43:5, “Hope in God, for *I shall again praise Him*, the help of my countenance and my God.”
- 43:4, “Then *I will go to the altar of God, to God* my exceeding joy.”
- Still in verse 4, “upon the lyre *I shall praise You*, O God, my God.”

The Psalmist is not bargaining with God. He does not say, “If you make all this go away, if you vindicate me over the deceitful and unjust, then I will do these things.” No! He says “I shall!” “I will!” He knows that “The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night...” (42:8). And so he simply, yet profoundly asks God to do what He has promised, as 43:3 states, to “send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling places.”

In your dark nights of the soul, plan and act on the truths of who and what God is and what He has promised you. Sometimes that means the difficult and painful letting go, turning away from things you know do not please God. Sometimes it means embracing truth and faith that has been difficult for you to embrace. Many times it means acting on what you know is right despite your feelings, not because of them.

The final lesson about moving from a minor to major key in these Psalms is trust and hope in God in every step out. Victor Frankl was a neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust. He wrote,

“There is nothing in the world... that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one’s life.”³

And so his well-known statement, “Despair is suffering without meaning.”

This son of Korah, this musician who wrote these Psalms was suffering. He was spiritually dry, crying in misery from being separated, isolated, ridiculed and abused by deceitful and ungodly people. Yet he survived and moved forward because his meaning was grounded and wrapped up in eternal, sovereign, holy, loving, just God. Grounded and wrapped up in God,

- “the God of my life” (42:8);
- “my rock” (42:9);
- “my strength” (43:2);
- “my exceeding joy” (43:4);
- grounded and wrapped in “my God” (42:6, 11; 43:34, 5).

Three times he tells himself, “Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him” (42:5, 11; 43:5). Every step toward the light, every preparation for singing and living in a major key, was energized and guided by trust and hope in God.

I think of the apostle Paul. He told us,

“we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

Why could Paul say this? Because his trust and hope, his present confidence and certain expectation for the future was grounded and wrapped up in God. So then, in all our dark nights we need to take every step toward the light, make every preparation for living in a major key being energized and guided by trust and hope in God.

Conclusion.

Hebrews 12:2-3 reminds us that Jesus,

“for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For *consider Him* who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so *that* you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Beyond the suffering son of Korah or the apostle Paul, our example is Jesus. His suffering was in every way infinitely more than we will ever face. Yet we are to “consider Him,” to use Him as our example and by doing that, not grow weary and lose heart. Whenever you find your life in a minor key, look to and draw on the presence and power of Jesus.

In these next quiet moments that you spend with Him, thank Him that you are not alone, that you are never alone, that He is always with you. Then, if you are in a dark night now, tell God you will begin or continue the process of facing and examining the truth about yourself, focusing on Him and His blessings, planning and taking positive steps, and trusting and hoping in Him in every step out.

Reach out to him, and also to others who can help you, remembering that your dark night may come from a combination of physical, situational, psychological, emotional and spiritual factors.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Spiritual Depression*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965, p. 19

² Ibid. p. 20.

³ Victor E. Frankl. *Man's Search For Meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985, p. 126.

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