



Sermon Transcript March 31, 2019

Finding God in the Hard Place How to Cry Out to God Psalm 142

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 31, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 142

¹ With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.

² I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

³ When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. ⁴ Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul. ⁵ I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

⁶ Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low!

Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me!

⁷ Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!

The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.

Introduction

We are talking about finding God in the hard place. And we are using the cave as a symbol for the hard place. I have had several people confess to me over the last several weeks, “I am in the cave.” That is code for; “I am in a hard place.” Do you know what you find in the cave? Do you know what is true about the hard place? It is a place filled with all kinds of emotions.

Our passage this morning, Psalm 142, is filled with strong emotion. In this psalm, David confesses that *his spirit is faint*. That means he is exhausted in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally. He says in verse 6 that he is *brought very low*. David is feeling down and discouraged, his mood is gloomy. What is interesting about Psalm 142 is that it is often coupled with Psalm 57, the psalm we will look at next week. D. A. Carson is not alone in suggesting that these two psalms “should be read in tandem.”¹ It is the cave that ties them together. Both of these psalms are attributed to David when he was hiding in the cave of Adullam while fleeing from King Saul. But the difference between these two psalms is that in Psalm 57, David is rather confident and upbeat. His mood is different in Psalm 57 than it is in Psalm 142. It is the same cave. But at times, in this cave, his emotions are up. And at times his emotions are down. Don’t you find that to be true about the hard place? Sometimes you are up. Sometimes you are down.

In their book *The Cry of the Soul*, Allender and Longman make some interesting observations about our emotions. They observe that “emotions are like the wind—full of mystery . . . Emotions seem to be one of the least reliable yet most influential forces that guide our lives. Some days we feel great. Confidence and good tidings glide us into the new day; we tackle difficult tasks and succeed. Other days we might experience a downsizing in emotion that we can’t explain and are helpless to change.”²

Sometimes we don’t know what to do with these negative emotions that tend to overcome us when we are in the cave. I even wonder if as Christians sometimes we might feel guilty for feeling these negative emotions. Aren’t we told to “*Rejoice always!*” And yet, I have these feelings that come upon me “like the wind.” I can’t deny what I am feeling. At times I find myself feeling angry or fearful or discouraged. Is that wrong of me? Is that unspiritual of me? Does that mean I am not trusting God?

Our emotions are what connect our inner world to our external world. What I am feeling is part of my reality. Over the past few years in our Community Groups, we have used the following mechanism to “check-in” with each other. We call it SASHET. It is

an acronym for six emotions you may be feeling at a given moment. The emotions are: Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender. So when we check in with each other we ask; “Which of these emotions are you most feeling right now and why?” When I “check -in” with what I am feeling I am saying to the group, this is my reality. This is where I find myself at this given moment. In fact, Allender and Longman suggest that when we ignore our emotions we are turning our back on reality. They write, “Listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God.”³

Do you know what the upside is to these strong “negative” emotions we often have when we are in the cave? They force us to ask hard questions about life and about God. Does life make sense? Is there purpose to my pain? Why must every relationship end? Is God really good? Do you ever look at the ugly side of life—the terrible things that just happen in this world and throw up your hands and say—“I don’t get it. I just don’t get . . . God.” Why does God do this? Why does God allow this?

Managing our inner emotions is a complex endeavor. Being the broken and sinful people we are, our emotions can lead us away from God. Obviously, that is not what we want. I have stood at the death bed of people who took their bitter spirit with them to the grave. Because of whatever pain they experienced, they chose to shut God out of their lives and to harbor their bitterness to the end. But the answer to preventing that is not found in ignoring or suppressing our emotions. Rather, we need to learn how to give voice to the cry of our soul. We need to learn how to allow our anger or our grief or our fear or our discouragement move us towards God.

Joni Eareckson Tada says that is the beauty of the Psalms. She writes, “The Psalms show the heart not only how to speak, but to listen. If emotions are the language of the soul, then the Book of Psalms gives us the grammar and syntax teaching us how to wrestle, inviting us to question, and vent anger in such a way as to move up and out of despair.”⁴

I am sure if I asked you to SASHET with me this morning, there would be plenty of Sad, Angry or Scared emotions shared. The goal is not to suppress those emotions. Rather, the goal is to allow the cry of the soul to be heard by God. I want us to learn from David, from Psalm 142, how to move towards God when we are overcome by these emotions of anger and grief and fear and discouragement. From this passage, I want to share four practical thoughts about what it looks like move towards God as you wrestle with these emotions. As we get started, I want to assure you that God shows himself to us more often in our darkness than in the happy moments of life. And you probably won’t get your questions answered. But you will meet God. And, that is enough.

Tell God How You Feel

The first thing we learn about how to address these negative emotions is to simply tell God how you are feeling. That is what David does. He begins Psalm 142 by giving voice to how he is feeling. *“With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.”*

Lets remind ourselves what is happening with David. After having been anointed the next king of Israel, David found himself serving King Saul in the palace. He prospered in everything he did. He quickly grew in notoriety and he was greatly admired. Consequently, King Saul became jealous of David and felt threatened by David and so he tried to kill David. Now David finds himself on the run as he seeks shelter in the cave of Adullam. In the meantime, Saul amassed his vast army and he is in pursuit of David. David is now a wanted and a hunted man.

We saw last week that several hundred men aligned themselves with David at the cave of Adullam. One of these men who aligned themselves to David was a man by the name of Abiathar. He was the grandson of the priest, Ahimelech. When David first fled from Saul, he went to Ahimelech. David lied to the priest. He said Saul had sent him on an urgent and secret mission and so he asked the priest to supply him with some food and if he could take Goliath’s sword, which had been stored there. The priest believed David and assisted him with his request. When Saul found out about this, he summoned the priest and his entire family before him and accused him of conspiring against the king. This caught Ahimelech by surprise and he insisted on his innocence. Saul would have nothing of it and he ordered that Ahimelech and his entire family be executed on the spot. On that day, eighty-five priests and all of their families—women and children—were slaughtered by Saul’s command. Only one escaped. It was Abiathar who fled to David at the cave of Adullam and told him what had happened. Upon hearing this news, David said to Abiathar, *“I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father’s house.”* Can you imagine what that must have felt like to David? This would be one of those situations that would cause me to say, “I don’t get it. I don’t get . . . God.”

So what do we do with these things? How do we process the messy things of life that deeply trouble us? We do what David did. *“With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.”* When David says, *“I pour out my complaint”* he is indicating that he is earnest in his prayer. He is not holding anything back in issuing his complaint to God. He is telling God his trouble. He is telling God how he is feeling.

That is the first thing we need to learn to do when we are experiencing these negative feelings. Tell God how you feel. God is big enough to take your anger. God is not flustered or surprised by it. I think we are often afraid to talk to God this candidly. And so we repress how we are feeling and under the guise of being spiritual we talk about “giving it all over to the Lord.” All the while, we are not being honest with our feelings.

This is not the pattern we find in the Book of Psalms. Out of the 150 psalms, 67 psalms are considered laments. I would imagine if you were to identify a word you associate with the psalms you might choose the word “praise.” But the largest type of psalm you find among the 150 psalms is the psalm of lament. These psalms are cries of despair, anger, protest and doubt. Bill Muehlenberg said of these psalms, “they may be an embarrassment to some Christians, but they are a normal part of Israel’s praise and worship – which is what the psalms were all about.”⁵ D. A. Caron adds, “There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God.”⁶

I think what pleases God with David is that he is taking his anger and his confusion and his discouragement and he is moving towards God by expressing to God how he is feeling. It was to the LORD he cried out. It was to the LORD he pleaded for mercy. It was to him—God—to whom he issued his complaint. And it was to him—God—he told his troubles to. And so if anything, the expression of these negative feelings was not a lack of trust or a lack of faith. The fact that he went to God with them was actually an expression of faith and trust. He saw God as someone he could turn to as he wrestled with the questions that plagued him. That is where God meets us. He meets us when we wrestle with the questions that emerge in our hearts because of our troubles. Psalm 77 highlights some of the questions that emerge in our hearts when we bring these things to God:

*Has the Lord rejected me forever?
Will he never again be kind to me?
Is his unfailing love gone forever?
Have his promises permanently failed?
Has God forgotten to be gracious:?
Has he slammed the door on his compassion?*

Mark Vroegop couches our complaint and these questions like this: “This is how I feel even though I know that is not ultimately true, but it feels true in the moment.”⁷

These are the hard questions that emerge from a discouraged and struggling heart. But

in asking these questions, I am moving towards God. And I can only do that if I am being honest with how I feel. This is where you need to start. From time to time, I have counseled people to actually write out their own “psalm of lament.” It is alright to express to God how you are feeling. Tell him what is making you angry. Pour out your complaint to God. He already knows what you are feeling anyway. But by turning to him with your inmost feelings, you are moving towards him. Joni says this, “After all, the people you really get angry with are the ones you trust most deeply. ‘I’m mad as a hornet, God, and I don’t understand what you are doing one bit!’ sounds like the dark side of trust, but it’s trust, nonetheless.”⁸

Ponder the Things of God

While it is good to express our lament to God, it is not good to stay there. Our lament is a means to an end. It should lead us to trust God and to find hope in God. For example, Psalm 4:4 warns us, “*In your anger do not sin.*” It reminds us of the warning Paul gives in Ephesians 4:26, “*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.*” While anger is an appropriate emotion, if we don’t take it to God we can easily be consumed by it and this can lead us away from God. And so Psalm 4:4 concludes by saying, “*when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*” In other words, once you offer your complaint to God, be still and wait. Ponder the things of God. Bring to remembrance what you know to be true about God.

That is what David does after he issues his complaint to God. Exhausted from his wrestling with God and his running from Saul, he confesses, “*my spirit faints within me.*” I think this ushers David into a time of waiting. It ushers him into a posture of being still before God. The Puritans had a word for this. They would say, “Sit with yourself.” The word “sit” is an operative word. It doesn't mean you aren't doing anything. You are just pausing—being still and quiet—and you are pondering the things of God. You are reminding yourself what you know to be true about God.

What is it that David remembers when he comes to the end of himself and ponders God? For starters, he says of God, “*you know my way.*” He is comforted by the fact that God knows his situation. God sees him there in the cave. God knows where Saul’s vast army is currently stationed. God knows what David is feeling. There is comfort in that. It is the comfort we read of in Psalm 139. “*O LORD you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways . . . Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.*”

One of the pressing things David seems to be feeling is loneliness. Even when we are surrounded by people, we can feel very much alone in our trouble. After all, you are the one facing the difficulty. And so David confesses, *“In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul.”* When he says that there is no one standing to his right, he is referring to the side where a witness or your legal council would stand to defend you. So he is saying that there is no one to defend him against Saul. There is no one who can advocate for him. He is alone.

But then he is reminded that he is not alone. God is at his side. He says in verse 5, *“I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.”* I have come to really love the phrase, “God is your portion.” It is a phrase used several other places in the Book of Psalms. For example, in Psalm 16:5, David says that God is his *“chosen portion.”* In Israel’s vocabulary it was a word that referred to the land that the Israelites would inherit. Each family inherited their “portion.” Not so the priests. Numbers 18:20 tells us that they didn’t inherit a portion of land. Rather God was their portion. They were set aside for God. But what is interesting with Psalm 16 is that it is set in contrast to Psalm 17. In Psalm 17, the people of the world are those who are described as those *whose portion is in this life.* And so as David is pondering God and his own sufferings, he is reminded that all the “stuff” of this life is fleeting. Instead, his chosen portion is God and that is what lasts.

In the *ESV Psalter* the devotional for Psalm 16 asks this question. “Have you tasted this? Have you been freed from the endless quest to secure stability and joy in the things of this world? Have you been ushered into the invincibility of knowing that no matter what you lose in terms of your health, finances, marriage, children, job, emotional sanity, the Lord is your ever-present refuge and life?”⁹ I find that learning what it means that God is my portion is discovered in the wrestling we do with God. Joni says that “suffering is God’s way of causing our feet to swell to the point where earth’s shoes don’t fit anymore.”¹⁰ Suffering gets us to the point where we realize all I need is God. God is my portion. God is enough. This is where the honest cry of the soul takes us. It causes us to ponder God and it takes us to a God who alone can satisfy.

Offer Your Request with Faith

Notice what happens next. Once David ponders the things of God and remembers that God is his portion, he offers his petition to God. With faith he makes his request. He prays, *“Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low! Deliver me from my persecutors, for*

they are too strong for me! Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!” Here David did find turning to God and relying on God. He knows that God will hear and respond to his need. Do you believe that God hears your prayers and parts the heavens to come to your aid?

I read the story of a business man who had to travel a lot. When his family dropped him off at the airport, his two-year old son knew that it meant that his daddy was leaving again and he became inconsolable. This tugged at the heart of this father and he was tempted to cancel his trip. He thought to himself that if this is how he feels at the cry of his son, how much more must God our Father feel when we cry out in our petitions for help. Do you doubt it? Consider the dramatic way Psalm 18 describes God responding to our prayers. David says,

*“From his temple he heard my voice; and my cry came before him into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountain shook . . .
He parted the heavens and came down . . . He mounted the cherubim and flew;
He soared on the wings of the wind . . . He reached down . . . And took hold of
me.”*

What a great image of God responding to our prayers and to our need. *“He parted the heavens and he came down.”* Of course, this was most demonstrated to us in Jesus who stepped out of heaven and came down to meet our deepest needs. Jesus knows very well the cry of the soul. Borrowing from the psalms, he cried from the cross a cry of complaint, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”* No one was more God-forsaken than Jesus when he bore our sin on the cross. But did God turn a deaf ear to the cry of Jesus? It may seem so. He died! But three days later, he rose from the dead. And because of this, we can be sure that God will deliver us—God will set us free! Joni says that in turning to God if you give him an inch, he’ll take a mile . . . He will soar on the wings of the wind from heaven to here to show you who he is, to embrace you with his love.¹¹

God often does not answer the “why” question. But he answers the “who” question. He assures you that he cares and that though your emotions may say you are forsaken, the truth is that God is with you in Christ. Some of these issues we deal with won’t go away. They are here to stay. One of the ways God answered prayer for David is that Jonathan—his best friend—showed up. And 1 Samuel 23:17 it says that Jonathan *“strengthened his hand in God.”* In other words, he reminded David of the promises of God. I often pray that for people who find themselves in hard places. That at just the right time, God would send his people to remind them that God is with them. So in

your time of trouble, offer your petition with faith. And God will rend the heavens and come down. He has already done so in Jesus. He will supply all you need.

Keep the End in Mind

I love the last phrase of this psalm. It is pretty typical of these cries of lament. They lead us to great hope. Here David says with great assurance, *“The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.”* In other words, he knows that others will hear of his story and of how God delivered him out of his trouble. This will be a source of encouragement to others as they too give thanks to God for what God has done in David’s life.

That is the beauty of being part of the body of Christ. We are in a room filled with people who know what it is like to be in the cave. The “cry of the soul” can be heard from many corners of this room. And yet it is a cry that trusts God. And you continue to live and walk by faith. You are a testimony of how God sustains his people and answers our cries. And because of Jesus, his death and resurrection, we know that in the end all things will truly work for good to those who love him.

Conclusion

So what do you do when you are down? It is only human of us to be down. It is not a sign that you lack faith or are unspiritual. You just need to know what to do with these emotions so that you can use them to turn to God.

I would recommend that you find a Psalm of Lament and memorize it. It is true that we need to learn to complain. But we also need to learn how to complain the right way. These psalms of lament can help us do that. And in doing that, take these four points as sequential steps when you are feeling down and discouraged.

Tell God how you feel. That is what Sarah Vroegop did after a having a still birth, multiple miscarriages and then a false-positive pregnancy test. Slumping into the car she cried out to God, “God, I know you are not mean, but it feels like it today.”¹² God felt very distant to her at that moment and she gave voice to it.

Be still before God and ponder what you know to be true about God. Often our emotions cause us to doubt what we know in our minds to be true. I think of that verse that says, *“Be still and know that I am God.”*

Offer your petition to God with faith. He not only hears your prayers but he renders heaven and takes hold of us. We know that because of what we know about Jesus.

Know that others will be encouraged and give thanks to God because of how God is using your story of faith in the assembly of the righteous.

I close with the words of Habakkuk.

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”

¹D. A. Carson *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998) July 8

²Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III *The Cry of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994) 20

³Ibid., 24

⁴Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 157

⁵Bill Muehlenberg “The Lament Psalms” billmuelenberg.com February 2, 2012

⁶D. A. Carson quoted in billmuelenberg.com February 2, 2012

⁷Mark Vroegop *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019)

⁸Eareckson Tada, 152

⁹*ESV Devotional Psalter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) Psalm 16

¹⁰Eareckson Tada, 202

¹¹Ibid., 157

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Check-in with each other using SASHET. Which of these emotions are you most feeling and why? Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender. Then offer a word of encouragement to each person through prayer. (It is best to get in smaller groups to do this - perhaps groups of 3).
2. What is one thing you took from the sermon you would like to share with the group?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Psalm 142:1-2; Psalm 77:6-9. Do you feel free to complain to God? Why or why not? What questions emerge in your heart as you wrestle with God?
4. Read Psalm 142:3-5; Psalm 37:7-8; Psalm 27:13-14. What does it look like to “be still wait for the Lord?” What do you discover about God when you wait and ponder the things of God?
5. Read Psalm 142:6-7; Psalm 18:6-19. What encouragement do these passages give you as you take your requests to God?
6. Read Psalm 142:7, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. How have you been encouraged by the faithfulness of others? How does this encourage you in your own difficulties?

Taking It Home

7. Consider identifying and memorizing a psalm of lament that you can use to help you cry out to God.
8. What word of encouragement have you received from your discussion that you can apply to your own life?