

## Biblical Self-Talk before Communion

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*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? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.*

*Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar. Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Yet the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life. I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?*

*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.*

—Psalm 42

Communion with God in general, and the week of preparation leading up to communion at the Lord's Table can sometimes be a challenging week for believers as we deal with obstacles to communion. What are some of the greatest obstacles to communion with God? The most obvious answer is sin. Sin is the great disruptor of communion with God. Sin is one of the great

obstacles we face as we prepare our hearts for communion next week. Unbelief is another obstacle that believers face. This seems to be a contradiction in terms, doesn't it—believer and unbelief in the same sentence—and yet it can be a reality in a believer's life. There can be moments of unbelief fueled by doubts about our state before God. There is the reality of spiritual depression and an acute sense that the Lord is distant. There is the reality of a soul that has become disquieted, turbulent, striving to find God, and mourning this reality. How do you prepare in such a spiritual condition? How do you speak truth to yourself in such a condition? How does faith continue to lay hold of God and of Christ in such a condition? Psalm 42 gives us a very helpful way of doing those very things. Our theme is “Biblical Self-Talk Before Communion”: (1) speaking to my desiring soul; (2) speaking to my distanced soul; (3) speaking to my depressed soul; and (4) speaking to my deserted soul.

### **Speaking to My Desiring Soul**

Psalm 42 highlights some of the obstacles to spiritual communion with God. It is unclear what exactly the historical circumstances of this psalm are. This is the beauty of such a psalm, that it does not limit its application to specific believers in specific situations. Rather, the application is expanded in its generality so that believers can learn to speak to themselves biblically in overcoming obstacles to spiritual communion with God, no matter what your circumstances are.

The first *obstacle* that this psalm points out is thirst for God. In verses 1–2, the psalmist uses a picture from nature—a deer. Many of us are familiar with this picture. In fact, it's a deer that's being pursued, hunted. As it runs, it becomes thirsty. In the midst of the intensity and heat of the pursuit, the deer begins to pant and heave for water. Water is essential to maintain its vitality and strength to escape the hunter and slake its thirst. Those familiar with the Dutch musical rendition of Psalm 42 would know that the word “panteth” is rendered as “shrieking or screaming” for

water.<sup>1</sup> This is strong, intense language. The psalmist says, “As the hart [deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God.” It indicates an intensity of desire for water. It indicates a sense of desperation, a craving that arises from the absence of that which gives life and strength. The obstacle is thirst; the object of that intense desire is water.

This can also be true for believers seeking communion with God. The hunter comes—sin and Satan—and pursues and tries to hunt us down for the kill. The chase is intense. The flight from sin is desperate. It creates spiritual thirst. It creates a longing, an intense desire to be safe and to draw in the life-giving water of the Spirit again. The chase can be intense, can’t it? All sorts of enemies hiding along the way, shooting their arrows, trying to bring down for the kill. In the meantime, the soul grows thirsty and parched. The soul yearns and cries out, even shrieks, in the midst of the chase and its thirst for God. The obstacle is spiritual thirst because of the heated chase. Our soul cries out, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God.” There can be spiritual dry spells that set in unnoticed and before you know it, you are walking in the desert of spiritual barrenness, wandering and thirsting and yearning for God again. How do we talk to ourselves in such a condition?

We talk to ourselves in the language of this psalm. We acknowledge the obstacle—spiritual thirst. But we also acknowledge the object for which we thirst and the only object that can ever satisfy—the living God. This implies the life-giving and enriching power of the Holy Spirit, who makes life to abound. This spiritual thirst should bring us to the living God. It should bring us to the powerful and life-giving promise of Isaiah 44:3. “For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground.” We lay hold of that promise in the midst of the chase, and we rest there. We turn to the living God and hear His word, “Blessed

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1. 't Hijgend hert, der jacht ontkomen, schreeuwt niet sterker naar 't genot van de frisse waterstromen, dan mijn ziel verlangt naar God.

are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6). We take encouragement from these words, that spiritual thirst does not have the final word, but it brings us back to the fountain of living waters—the LORD Himself (Jer. 2:13). The obstacle of spiritual thirst is overcome by returning to the object—the living God. We live in light of this question of verse 2, “When shall I come and appear before God?” The very tenor of this question implies that the desire will be fulfilled, even though it is not immediately on the horizon. We don’t say in hopelessness, “I’m never going to see God again.” No, but *when* will it happen again? This is how we speak to our desiring soul.

### **Speaking to My Distanced Soul**

But there may also be the obstacle of spiritual distance. This distance is implied in the words of verse 2b: “When shall I come and appear before God?” It’s implied again in the question put to the psalmist by his enemies, “My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, ‘Where is thy God?’” In verse 4, the distance is implied in the memory of the tabernacle and going up with the people of God to praise the LORD: “When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.” The great obstacle for the psalmist to spiritual communion is distance from God, distance from the place where the presence of God was in the midst of Israel, distance from the place of sacrifice at the altar.

This physical distance described by the psalmist is symptomatic of a loss of spiritual communion with God. The physical distance from the means of grace only exacerbates the spiritual distance that has now come between the believer and God. What does this spiritual distance look like in a believer’s life? First of all, this distance can come as a result of circumstances that are beyond our control, when the enemy gets the upper hand in our lives and, as the psalmist points out, tauntingly asks, when you are

down already, “Where is now your God?” There are circumstances of life that become so great that spiritual distance grows between us and God. Other times, this spiritual distance comes as a result of separation from the means of grace, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Spiritual distance comes when we leave off the reading of the Word of God, the place where God reveals Himself and where He speaks to our souls. Or we have checked out of the preaching of the Word because the cares of this life have become so consuming. Or we withhold ourselves from communion, not because of sin, but because of a lack of assurance, or thinking that we need some special experience first.

How do you speak to your distanced soul then? Learn from the psalmist that there were prior times of communion with God. In verse 4, there is the memory of that communion that we’ve enjoyed before. There was the joy and praise with the multitude. Do you remember that, my soul? Do you remember the times of sweet communion with Jesus? The remembrance of spiritual closeness in the past speaks about the possibility of spiritual closeness in the present and future. But then in verse 5, we have this self-talk: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.” Spiritual distance brings spiritual depression, restlessness, and turbulence. It gives the sense of the soul striving within itself, searching for God again. This is a question that a believer must pose in preparing for communion. It is a question that does not end in despair but ends in hope in God. And what does hope do for us? It anticipates the return of spiritual communion with God. It anticipates future praise for the help of God’s countenance and favor, literally the salvation of His presence. Our hope for communion does not lie in ourselves. It does not end in the obstacle of distance but lies in the salvation that God provides through His presence.

### **Speaking to My Depressed Soul**

But there's yet another obstacle that is inter-woven into the believer's search for communion with God. This obstacle is depression. This is how the psalmist describes his soul in verse 5: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" He continues to expand on this in verse 6, speaking to God, "O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar." He picks up the refrain in verse 11 again: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" The word cast down has the idea of being dissolved. Children, what happens when you put sugar or salt or some other powder in water? It dissolves, doesn't it? It becomes one with the water and it becomes invisible. This is the spiritual depression that afflicts the psalmist. He has become dissolved. He has become one with the circumstances around himself. He is in a distant land. In verse 7 he writes, "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." His troubles have dissolved his soul so that it becomes one with his troubles and circumstances and he loses sight of God in the midst of it all. The horizon has become dark with the frown of God's providence. Spiritual thirst and spiritual distance leads to spiritual depression and darkness.

This is a reality that believers can face in their lives—spiritual depression, a dissolving and becoming one with circumstances so that they cannot apprehend God anymore: Job in the furnace of affliction, Elijah in his post-Carmel depression, and Jeremiah grieving the day of his birth and calling for the day of his death. The psalmist here in Psalm 42 and again in Psalm 77 expresses this reality of spiritual depression, of being downcast and dissolved and losing sight of God. The circumstances of life can press down so hard, and darkness press in so hard, that the soul loses all sense of hope. The temptation is to give up and give in and let darkness and spiritual numbness be the norm. So how do we speak to ourselves when spiritual depression seems to block our

way to communion with God, and we can't make heads or tails of our spiritual life?

We heed the counsel from these words as the psalmist takes himself in hand and speaks to his own soul. Listen to what he says in verse 6: "O my God, my soul is cast down within me: *therefore* will I remember thee from land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar." Bring God to mind in the fog of spiritual depression and the cycle of spiritual cynicism and questions. There is intentionality in this word "remember." The word *remember* in Scripture indicates that things turn around—when God remembered Noah, the flood waters receded (Gen. 8:1). For a believer, remembering is not simply thinking about the past and what God has done, though it certainly is that. But it is looking back with anticipation that God will change things and the clouds will begin to lift and we will enjoy spiritual communion again. In verse 8, we read these words of counsel that are a balm to the discouraged and depressed soul: "Yet the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life." There again are words of hope expressed in the darkness of the soul's night. The obstacle is depression; the object is God, the God of my life.

His lovingkindness is His covenant faithfulness, and this upholds us in the darkest moments of our lives and brings us back to God Himself. The Lord commands this lovingkindness. This is God's covenant love, an unbreakable love that God directs to sustain His own and bring them to the joy of spiritual communion again. This is the object of our faith in the midst of the circumstances of life that threaten to dissolve us. There is the future prospect of songs and praise again as a result of God's faithfulness and love. What will you say to yourself in this week of preparation? *It's all hopeless for me, or, God will command His lovingkindness?*

### **Speaking to My Deserted Soul**

The final obstacle to communion is the sense of desertion by God. The psalmist says in verse 9, "I will say unto God my rock,

Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of my enemy? As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?" The perception is that God has forgotten him, that God has left him over to his enemies. There is a perception of abandonment by God that can plague a believer and leave him facing this insurmountable obstacle. He thinks that God is ignoring him, while his enemies seem to give him all the unwanted attention. As a result, he is mourning. He is clothed, as it were, in the darkness of mourning clothes. He grieves over this sense of abandonment. The taunting of his enemies is like a sword in his bones as they ask him where God is, the sense of abandonment being confirmed and mocked by his enemies.

This can be the experience and perception of believers as they face spiritual depression—God has deserted me. Surely the One who is my Rock will protect me, won't He? But it doesn't seem like He hears me at all. It seems that He rather ignores me. It seems I'm all alone. There is intense grief and sorrow at the seeming loss of God's protection. It seems that everything is against a believer in such a condition, and it's only made worse by enemies.

How do you talk to yourself in such a condition? Listen to the words that come from the mouth of the psalmist. So often, our experience seems so stark, so dark, so solidified and with little hope of change. But listen to how the psalmist speaks here. There is a mixture of despondency and faith, isn't there? Not all is lost after all. God will not hide His face. There is a constant possession of God in the midst of all these obstacles. There is still a laying hold of God in the personal sense. A believer may, and indeed must, appropriate God for himself. "I will say." There is a commitment in these words. I will say unto God my rock. If the case were utterly lost there would not be such an expression of faith in the midst of the struggle. The psalmist gives us helpful counsel in dealing with the troubles of the soul.

But then, too, he picks up the refrain of the song that he has written in verse 11, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why



art thou disquieted within me?” The psalmist turns inward in the right sense of the action and questions himself to get to the root of the issue at hand. Why all the turmoil? Why the depression? Why the restlessness? Is there not rest for my soul? Yes, indeed there is—in God. And that’s what he counsels himself to do, even as believers are called to counsel themselves in this week of preparation to face the obstacles that war against us having communion. Say this to yourself and live in the reality of these words, “Hope thou in God.” Hope looks beyond, to what is coming. Hope is the opposite of despair and despondency. Hope is anchored in God in the midst of the storms and obstacles. Hope looks at Christ and sees in Him what you need—satisfaction for the desiring soul, communion for the distanced soul, joy for the depressed soul, and nearness for the deserted soul. He is the one who was hunted, and thirsted for God in our place. He was the one who was distanced from His Father on the cross. He was the one who experienced the darkness of hell and was dissolved, as it were, under His Father’s wrath. He was the one who experienced desertion as He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46).

As we hope in God, there is a recognition that help will come. There is the sense that though we experience these obstacles, the Lord will intervene. And we can praise Him in the midst of these obstacles: “Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.” Here again, there is the personal appropriation of God. He is my Savior and my God. He will save. He will draw again in communion. There are many obstacles. But He is the object of my faith and trust and hope. Hope in God, ye waiting saints, and He will well provide. Amen.