

# “Prayer and Despair”

The Six Psalms, Part 6

Psalm 143

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# I. Giant Despair

Some say Christians should not be depressed. They don't know the Psalms. Spiritual depression is real; Psalm 143 knows.

[Read Psalm 143.]

Charles Spurgeon suffered from depression of spirit. He called it:

- “The worst cloud of all is deep depression of spirit.”
- “The worst ill in the world is a depressed spirit.”
- “Of all things in the world to be, dreaded despair is the chief.”
- “Depression is . . . the shadow of death.”
- “Depression is . . . my horror of great darkness.”<sup>1</sup>

To Spurgeon, depression was not merely “dullness, inertia, pessimism, and deep unhappiness,” but to feel the removal of God's presence.<sup>2</sup> He called this the “worst ill”: “To be forsaken of God is the *worst ill* that the most melancholy saint ever dreams of.”<sup>3</sup> The worst form of depression of spirit is to feel God's absence.

In John Bunyan's classic allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful stray off the path and get thrown into a very dark dungeon in Giant Despair's castle. “There they lay from Wednesday until Saturday night without food or

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Albert, “Spurgeon Can Help Your Depression,” The Spurgeon Center, November 9, 2017, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/spurgeon-can-help-your-depression/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

water and without a ray of light or anyone to console them.”<sup>4</sup> Their sufferings intensify each morning.

- *Thursday*. Giant Despair took his knotted club and beat them like “sheep-killing dogs.”

Then he fell upon them and beat them severely. They were helpless to resist or to ward off his blows. Then he left them in the dark to pity themselves and mourn in agony. They spent the whole day sighing and groaning.<sup>5</sup>

- *Friday*. He advised them to take their own lives, since rescue was hopeless. But when they refused his counsel, he promised they will wish they never had been born. Christian faltered and considered Giant Despair's advice. But Hopeful encouraged him to recall God's help along the way. He also reminded him he is not alone:

You see, I'm in the dungeon too, a far weaker person by nature and experience than you, receiving the same punishment and suffering the same agony. This giant has wounded me and has also cut off bread and water from my mouth. And along with you, I mourn without the light.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress in Today's English*, retold by James H. Thomas (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1964), 113. Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 116.

- *Saturday*. Giant Despair showed them the bones of those he had destroyed. Then he “beat them all the way into the dungeon” where “they lay all day Saturday in a deplorable condition.”<sup>7</sup>

**How do we escape the dungeon of Giant Despair?**

## II. Psalm 143: The Dungeon of Giant Despair

**Psalm 143 cries from the dungeon of Giant Despair.**<sup>8</sup>

- “*Pursued*” (v. 3) = hunted.<sup>9</sup> The verb means to be behind, follow after, or persecute.
- “*Fails*” (v. 4) = draining away.<sup>10</sup> The verb indicates growing weak: “overwhelmed” (NKJV); “fainted” (Alter).<sup>11</sup>
- “*Desolate*” (v. 4) = deserted. The Hebrew also indicates being appalled or stunned. *The Message*: “heavy like lead.”

This depression of spirit climaxes in v. 7—feeling forsaken by God.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>8</sup> While the Hebrew Bible only gives the title “A Psalm of David,” the LXX reads, “Of David, when Absalom his son was pursuing him.”

<sup>9</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007). Kindle.

*The Abbey.* O Lord, make haste and answer me, for my spirit fails within me. Do not hide Your face from me, lest I become like those going down to the pit.

*The Message.* Hurry with your answer, God! I'm nearly at the end of my rope. Don't turn away; don't ignore me! That would be certain death.

*NET.* Answer me quickly, Lord! My strength is fading. Do not reject me, or I will join those descending into the grave.

**Have you ever felt forsaken by God? Jesus did.<sup>12</sup>**

*Matthew 27:45–46.* Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Vv. 9–10 may be echoed in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, where He sought deliverance and God's will.

*Matthew 26: 38–39.* Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

*Psalms 143:9–10a.* Rescue me, O Lord, from my foes; to You have I fled for refuge. Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God.

**But in Psalm 143, Christ rests in the tomb, awaiting resurrection.** “Almost every line takes on an enhanced poignancy in that context.”<sup>13</sup> God did not

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<sup>12</sup> There may also be echoes of vv. 9–10 in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, seeking deliverance and God's will.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, revised (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2011), 287. Kindle.

abandon Jesus in the grave (cf. Ps 16:10; Acts 2:31). God will not abandon us. We may *feel* forsaken; but it never for real (cf. Matt 28:20).

God allows the Christian life to grow through cycles of peaks and valleys.

- Psalm 88 = valley of death
- Psalm 103 = peak of praise
- Psalm 143 = dungeon of despair

This is to teach us to stand up on our own legs.

*C. S. Lewis.* Sooner or later He [God] withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives [His felt presence]. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Prayer Heals Despair

**How do we escape the dungeon of Giant Despair? Through prayer.**

*C. S. Lewis.* Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2021), 39. Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 40.

## Prayer will heal our despair.

1. *Pray not in your own faithfulness, but in God's* (vv. 1-2).<sup>16</sup> In prayer, we learn to see God and to see ourselves in light of His grace and mercy.
2. *Recall God's works* (v. 5). One of the lies of despair is that life will carry on life this forever.
3. *Seek God's mercy in the morning* (v. 8).<sup>17</sup> Despair wants to keep up from moving forward. The God who raised Christ in the morning will raise us.

Back in the dungeon in Giant Despair's Castle, something happens around midnight on Saturday.<sup>18</sup> Christian and Hopeful began to pray and kept vigil until dawn. As the sun rose, Christian remembered something:

What a fool! What a fool I am to lie here in this stinking dungeon when I might walk free on the highway to glory! I have a key in my bosom called Promise which I am sure will open any door in Doubting Castle.<sup>19</sup>

And so they escaped. Will you?

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<sup>16</sup> Some see these verses behind Paul's declaration of justification apart from works of the law in Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:16. "The Psalmist is denying not the possibility of justification as such, but rather 'the possibility of a man's being justified on the basis of his deserts.'" See Moises Silva, "Galatians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 791. Though Psalm 143 does not use the phrase "works of the law," he may be re-expositing Psalm 143.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 143 has been prayed in the mornings by both Eastern and Western traditions for over 1,000 years. Interestingly, the West has specifically prayed Psalm 143 on Saturday mornings, possibly suggesting a correlation with Christ's resting in the tomb.

<sup>18</sup> It is hard not to see a connection between Bunyan's emphasis of their prayer on Saturday night and their "resurrection" on Sunday morning in connection with Christ's own burial and resurrection.

<sup>19</sup> Bunyan, 117.

Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us; for You are good and  
You love mankind. Amen.