



## SESSION 3

# WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES OVERWHELM

### ▶ **The Point**

God lifts us up when circumstances pull us down.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Psalm 42:1-3,6-8; 43:3-5

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

In the book *A Woman Overwhelmed*, Hayley DiMarco stated, “There are a lot of things to be overwhelmed with . . . worry, fear, faith, doubt, loss, gain, failure, rejection, acceptance, finances, love, hate, regret, responsibility, organization, mess, loneliness, hopelessness, inability, lack, abundance . . . and the list could go on. . . . But if I’m honest with myself, I’m not so much overwhelmed with my life as I am with everyone else’s. . . . If everyone would just do what I want them to do, I wouldn’t be so overwhelmed.” She concluded, “There are two results of comparing yourself with another human being: pride and depression.”<sup>4</sup>

In the two psalms we look at in this session, we find that even the psalmist had times when he was depressed and distressed. But God’s presence can give us the encouragement we need. He helps us look above and beyond our circumstances. In these verses we see the constant reminder to put our hope in God and worship Him in spite of anything we may face.

### ▶ **The Setting**

Psalms 42 and 43 can be taken together as a single lament. The psalmist expressed a great desire to be present and experience worship at the temple in Jerusalem, but he was unable. The reason for his absence from Jerusalem is not indicated, but suggestions range from his being unable to go to the temple because of distance, sickness, conflict, or exile. Whatever the reason, the psalmist expressed and experienced a deep longing for God.

# What does the Bible say?

**Deep calls to deep** (42:7)—The psalmist personified the waters, which call to one another as they flow over the waterfalls.

**Cast down** (43:5)—The Hebrew term comes from a root meaning “to be bowed down” and refers to a person weighed down with many cares and concerns.

## ***Psalm 42:1-3,6b-8; 43:3-5***

**42:1 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.**

**2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?**

**3 My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”**

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**42:6b My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.**

**7 Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.**

**8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.**

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**43:3 Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling!**

**4 Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.**

**5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.**

# GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



Notes

**DISCUSS: Question #1** on page 85 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): **“What are some things that lift your spirits when you’re feeling down?”** Allow time for each person to respond.

**LEADER PACK: In advance**, make enough copies of **Pack Item 8**, the “Life Stressors” handout, for your group members. Invite members to answer which life events they have experienced or seen others struggle to deal with.

**LIFE STRESSORS**

1. Death of a spouse or child
2. Divorce
3. Marital separation or family breakup
4. Jail sentence/imprisonment
5. Death of other close family member
6. Personal injury or serious illness
7. Excessive debt
8. Job loss or extended unemployment
9. Marital reconciliation
10. Retirement

What other life events cause you to feel overwhelmed?

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to **“The Bible Meets Life”** on page 86 of the PSG. Emphasize the importance of trusting God during difficult circumstances by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to **“The Point”** on page 86 of the PSG: **“God lifts us up when circumstances pull us down.”**

**ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance**, using a phone or other electronic device, load Chris Tomlin’s song “Faithful” or a similar song. Ask group members to spend a quiet time in reflection while the song plays. Then pray for your group, asking God’s blessing on your time together.

**Note:** You can find a link at our blog: [BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra).

**PRAY:** Transition into the study by asking the Lord to help group members see His hand in their circumstances. Ask Him for the strength to focus through hard times.

Dotted lines for taking notes.



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## Psalm 42:1-3 Commentary

**[Verse 1]** The psalmist used the simile of a **deer** longing for water to express his longing for God. The imagery pictures a deer, most likely after experiencing the effects of a drought, longing and searching for cool, refreshing, life-giving **streams** of water that could quench its thirst. As the deer longed for its thirst to be quenched, so too the psalmist longed for his inward thirst for **God** to be quenched. Note that the writer's immediate focus was not on the weight of his burdens or his circumstances. The desire of his heart was that his communion with God be restored. The writer did not view closeness to God as a luxury or something born out of convenience. Rather, as the deer needed the life-giving streams of water to survive, so too the psalmist viewed God's presence as a life-giving necessity.

**[Verse 2]** The psalmist described God as **the living God**. God is alive. He is not like the false gods of the nations, idols made by human hands. (See Ps. 115:4-8.) The living God brings salvation, giving those who seek Him the living water. (See John 4:14.)

The place in which the psalmist had previously experienced the presence of God was in the temple in Jerusalem. He desired to return there and once again experience God through worship. This is indicated by the psalmist's question of when he could once more **appear before God**.

**[Verse 3]** Living apart from the land of Israel, the psalmist could no longer worship inside the majestic Jerusalem temple. How could one describe such bitterness and grief? The psalmist stated that his tears had been his **food day and night**. In other words, the longing and pain was constant, with the psalmist day and night. The psalmist longed for the life-giving water of God, but instead was tasting the agonizing tears of isolation and emptiness.

Unfortunately this feeling was magnified by the continued jeers and taunts of his enemies. They mockingly asked him, "**Where is your God?**" This question may be an indication that the psalmist was in exile. With their question, his enemies asked why, if the psalmist's God was so great, had He abandoned him? In his condition, it must have seemed to the psalmist like God was either unwilling or unable to deliver him. Hence he lived in this continual state of anguish, with his enemies' taunts reinforcing the feeling of God's absence in his life.

The psalmist felt isolated from his God, his people, and his place of worship—the temple in Jerusalem. As he poured his heart out in grief, he looked back and remembered how glorious it had been to lead the people to the temple for worship. (See Ps. 42:4.) The psalmist then shifted his focus to the future. Recognizing the dejection and turmoil within his soul, he looked forward in hope that one day he once again would worship and praise God, his Savior. (See v. 5.) In the midst of his depression, the psalmist could still look forward to a day when things would change for the better. Deliverance would come, but the psalmist had to hope and wait on God.



## Psalm 42:6b-8 Commentary

**[Verse 6b]** As the psalmist experienced such overwhelming circumstances, he struggled to remember God's presence in his life. In spite of acknowledging his hope in God, the psalmist recognized that feelings of depression and isolation were still present. The psalmist stated, **my soul is cast down within me**. He now used vivid imagery to demonstrate how his feelings of depression and despair had escalated.

In his state of deep depression, the psalmist did what people often do when they reach such a level of despondency: he thought back to a time when things were better, to happier days. He remembered God in the context of the land in which he had lived. As the psalmist named specific locations in Israel, he emphasized his absence and distance from his land, his city Jerusalem, and its temple. These were places where in the past he had experienced the presence of God.

**[Verse 7]** As the psalmist's thoughts turned to the promised land, he once again used water imagery. However, instead of the gentle streams flowing in a drought stricken land (see Ps. 42:1), he used more forceful imagery. The deafening sounds of roaring waterfalls and rough waters seemingly calling to one another surrounded the psalmist. As billows and breakers would slam into someone lost at sea, so too the psalmist felt like he was being pounded by wave after wave of grief and emptiness.

The psalmist associated this water imagery with God. It was God's waterfalls that he heard roaring in his ears. It was God's breakers and billows that slammed into him. The psalmist had sought life-giving streams of water from God. But instead of life-giving water, God had sent him the roaring waters which flow over waterfalls and the life-threatening billows and breakers of a storm. The psalmist had sought life from God, but instead the psalmist felt like he was threatened with death.

The psalmist was going through a crisis of faith. He knew God *could* rescue him. The question was—could he trust that God *would* do so?

**[Verse 8]** In another moment of clarity, the psalmist remembered God's **steadfast love**. In the midst of his "drowning" in despair and doubt, the psalmist recalled God's love. The Hebrew term translated *steadfast love* refers specifically to God's covenant love. The term emphasizes God's faithfulness in remembering and keeping His covenants with both His people Israel specifically and to all humanity in general, even when people prove to be sinful and faithless.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of his doubt and despair, the psalmist remembered his God who is consistently faithful to His people day and night. He recognized that his life was in the hands of God, so it was to **the God of my life** that the psalmist offered his **prayer**.

In the midst of deep waters, the psalmist looked to his rock. He questioned why God had forgotten him. (See v. 9.) Why had God left him in the hands of his enemies, who mocked him, asking, "Where is your God?" (v. 10; see v. 3). For the second time, the psalmist uttered the refrain in which he questioned the depression in his soul and urged himself to again put his hope in God, his Savior. (See v. 11.)





## Psalm 43:3-5 Commentary

**[Verse 3]** Psalm 43 is the continuation to Psalm 42. But the tone and focus is strikingly different as the psalmist turned more toward praise and a sense of determination that hadn't been present to this point. He made a shift in thinking, turning away from self-evaluation and turning toward prayer and praise. Following the second refrain in 42:11, the psalmist was brought back into despair, wondering why he had to suffer, reminding God that he was surrounded by people who were constantly criticizing his faith and beliefs. This reminder was probably a plea to the Lord to vindicate the psalmist's righteousness and return him to Jerusalem, back into God's presence. (See Ps. 43:1-2.)

Verse 3 is the turning point where the psalmist moved from self-introspection to offering an urgent request to God for help. Surrounded by doubt, despair, depression, and the constant criticism of his enemies, the psalmist acknowledged that his only hope of being liberated from his oppression was by an act of God, his "refuge" (v. 2).

The psalmist's request in verse 3 personifies two character traits of God: His **light** and His **truth**. *Light* provides understanding to those seeking God, revealing and bringing them into God's presence. *Truth* designates the expression of God's faithfulness. It is the manifestation of His fidelity. It speaks of His Word and by it, coupled with the light, the psalmist could find his way back home.

**[Verse 4]** Finally the psalmist began to anticipate deliverance. In fact, he used a new designation for God, referring to Him as **God my exceeding joy**. That is what restoration offers. The psalmist now had not only hope but an expectation that God would do something great in his life as well.

While the metaphorical waves had threatened to smother him, the truth of God broke through to allow the psalmist to see with his spiritual eyes what his circumstances had kept hidden. He envisioned the time when he would return to Jerusalem and worship—when the psalmist would come to **the altar of God** and **praise** God for delivering him out of his miserable circumstances.

**[Verse 5]** The psalms' refrain is repeated again (see Ps. 42:5,11). The repetition of this chorus interspersed among his admissions of despair demonstrates how intense the conflict can be between faith and doubt, between hope and depression/despair. It is a constant threat as believers struggle to navigate the hills and valleys of life while at the same time attempting to keep their focus on God, our Savior. While some people suffer with medical conditions such as clinical depression, which should be addressed by trained physicians, the situation the writer described in Psalms 42–43 is the sadness, anxiety, doubt, and so forth that all people are susceptible to from time to time.

While the psalmist grappled with his emotions, the refrain that appears three times indicates that he realized that the remedy to his situation was to put his faith in God. While he did not deny what he was experiencing, he at the same time looked to the One who is greater than his feelings. The psalmist found comfort when he reflected on God's previous provision for him and understood that the same God who acted on his behalf in the past would certainly do the same in the future.



5 minutes

# LIVE IT OUT

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 92 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Talk to God.** If you are hurt, angry, or disappointed with God because of your circumstances, talk to Him about it. The psalmist wrote honestly about his feelings and circumstances, and an honest prayer is the place to start in getting rightly focused on God.
- ▶ **Worship.** Make a concerted effort to worship God. Worship and praise during your private devotional life and actively engage with others as you worship at church.
- ▶ **Talk to someone.** Do a serious personal evaluation about what causes depression in your life. Admit that it is real and it is serious. It might be time to talk with a close friend, pastor, or counselor about it.

## Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 92 of the PSG:

We all have times when we feel overwhelmed. The psalmist certainly did. But in those times we can bare our hearts before the Lord and look to Him for help. Sometimes He'll send that help through others.

**PRAY:** Conclude by thanking the Lord for walking with us through times when we feel overwhelmed and for lifting us up. Ask Him to prepare group members now for those times in the future that are almost certain to come.

**GROUPS  
MATTER.**

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[LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)