

# A Way Through Pain

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, New City. So, so glad to be able to share God's word with you again this morning.

Before I read Psalm 43, I want to point out that we're about to hear the prayer of a man in pain. We'll hear him cry out to God in his suffering.

He will wrestle with his own heart. He will wrestle with God. His prayer is like a path that starts in one place and leads him to another. And so let's look for that path together as we hear Psalm 43. Hear the word of the God who loves us and gave himself for us. Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people.

From the deceitful and unjust man, deliver me. For you are the God in whom I take refuge. Why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

[ 1 : 09 ] Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. 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. 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.

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Father, we come to this word. And we thank you for preserving it for us, this prayer of a man in pain.

And we ask, Father, that in our struggles, in our suffering, in our pain, that you would show us again this morning that you are good and you do good.

[ 2 : 17 ] And that all the good and bad things that happen in our lives, you work for good. To conform us to the good heart of Jesus.

In whose name we pray. Amen. In 2004, Tylenol ran a television ad campaign with this tagline, Pain is a waste of time.

Pain is a waste of time. Now, I love Tylenol. I just took some last night. It's not bad.

But the folks at Tylenol know us all too well. We don't have time to hurt, do we? We believe life is good only when we feel good.

And if life is good only when we feel good, then of course pain is a waste of time. Because it's getting in the way of the good life I'm trying to live.

[ 3 : 30 ] Todd and all is just trying to sell us the same product every commercial is selling us. The good life. And if I define the good life as getting what I want when I want it, then pain and suffering will be a waste of my time.

So, what then is the true good life? God defines the good life for us, not Tylenol.

And according to Jesus in John 17, 3, which Pastor Kevin just recently preached, Jesus said, this is eternal life, that they know you, Father, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

So, the good life is about knowing him. And then according to Romans 8, God works all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

The highest good being that he conforms us to the image of his son, Jesus. So, the real life, the real good life, means enjoying real relationship with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[ 4 : 50 ] And that relationship comes with the guarantee that because God loves his people, he will work all good and bad things in my life, in your life, in the life of New City, for our good, for the good of making us more and more like Jesus.

So then, no amount of pain or suffering can keep you or me or this church from having the good life that he wants for us.

Pain is not a waste of time. In fact, pain just might be what God uses to get us the good life he wants for us. God will use the pain you're experiencing to give you the good life we all ultimately need and want, as Paul said, and that is, to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection, sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Take that Tylenol. And that's what's happening in Psalm 43, friends. Psalm 43 is the prayer of a man who honestly struggles with his pain.

So he pleads to God in prayer to show him and to give him the good life of finding his exceeding joy in God. Psalm 43 can show us a way to pray through our pain, even if God doesn't take away our pain.

[ 6 : 27 ] Well, many scholars believe that Psalm 43 is a continuation, the third verse and chorus of Psalm 42. So Psalm 42 sheds some light on what's going on here.

Psalm 42 is the prayer of a desperate man of God who is far away from the house of the Lord. You see, the temple is in Jerusalem, way down south in Judah.

But the psalmist is stuck way up north near Mount Hermon, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. And he's trapped there because of the oppression of his enemies. Perhaps he is in exile.

But he longs to be in the house of God, where he can hear God's word and worship with God's people. His deepest desire is to be with God, near God, in the presence of God.

But his painful circumstances seem to be getting in the way. There's an enemy that wants to keep him from getting back to God. Friends, after 18 months of cancer treatments and the lasting effects they have on my body, I have to ask myself, is the deep desire of my heart this morning to be with God, near God, and in the presence of God, or do I just want the pain to go away?

[ 7 : 49 ] In Psalm 43, the psalmist prays through his pain, allowing his pain to drive him back to the one who matters most, the one who is his joy, his treasure, his everything.

Because he knows that God is the good life. God is his exceeding joy. So let's look at Psalm 43 again together and ask, what do we learn from Psalm 43 about praying through our pain?

Well, first of all, you'll see the psalm breaks down into two parts. We learn to pray first, and then we preach.

In verse 1, he says, oh God. So we, verses 1 through 4 about praying to your Savior.

And then in verse 5, he says, oh my soul. So he's directed his attention away from praying to God to now preaching to his soul. Now we're going to spend most of our time on verses 1 through 4, just so you know.

[ 9 : 03 ] And we'll put up a slide now so that you'll be able to follow along where I'm going. Because this is where we'll spend the bulk of our time. In verses 1 through 4, this man shows us a path for praying when we're in pain.

Not the only path, but a path. And this is that path. In verses 1 through 2, you start with the real you. And then also in verse 2, you talk to the real God.

Verse 3, walk in real repentance. And verse 4, find your real joy. So let's start with starting with the real you in prayer.

I love how Paul Miller describes prayer in his book, *A Praying Life*. He says, the real you has to meet with the real God in prayer.

He says, we're often so busy and overwhelmed that when we slow down to pray, we don't know where our hearts are. We don't know what troubles us. So oddly enough, he says, we might have to worry before we pray.

[ 10 : 15 ] Then our prayers will make sense. They'll be about our real lives. So think of whatever situation you're in that's causing you pain.

Think of it as if you're showing up at a new mall and you need a map. And so what do you do? You go look for that directory and you look for the red dot where it says, you are here.

Right? Before you can get to where you need to go, you've got to know where you are. And this man had to start with where he was.

Where was this man's heart? Verse 1, he felt attacked and accused. Vindicate me, O God. Defend my cause against an ungodly people.

He felt attacked and accused. He needed to be vindicated and defended. He was being honest with God about where he was. And then, also in verse 1, he felt desperate.

[ 11 : 21 ] From the deceitful and unjust man, deliver me. Whatever he was experiencing in this situation made him desperate.

So much so that he said, I have to be delivered, rescued. Rescue me, God, from this. I'm desperate. In verse 2, he felt abandoned.

And particularly by God. He says, why have you rejected me? I mean, all of these others have rejected me, but you too, Lord. He felt abandoned.

And then finally in verse 2, he felt discouraged. Why do I go about mourning? He was bringing his true, real self to God in prayer.

And friends, the Psalms, the Psalms are full of these kinds of expressions. And the Lord, the Holy Spirit, put these words in the Bible so that you will know you can come to God as the real you.

[ 12 : 30 ] You don't have to come up with fancy things to say. Start with where you are. Paul Miller says it this way. Jesus does not say, come to me, all you have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest.

No, Jesus opens his arms to needy children and says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Miller says the criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy. Don't try to get the prayer right, he says.

Just tell God where you are and what's on your mind. That's what little children do. They come as they are, runny noses and all. So where's your heart this morning?

Perhaps you are feeling attacked or accused. If not by other people, perhaps by your own heart.

[ 13 : 42 ] Perhaps by our enemy, the accuser. Are you feeling desperate? Like, Lord, you've got to deliver me from this.

Do you feel abandoned, even by God himself? Are you discouraged? If so, start your prayer there. Start with the real you. He invites you to. And then, talk to the real God. Look at verse 2.

For you are the God in whom I take refuge. Why have you rejected me? Remember, the real you has to meet with the real God.

You've been honest with God about how you see yourself. Now be honest with God about how you see God. Don't come to him as some thing you've always been taught, but you don't really believe.

[ 14 : 47 ] He says, he knows the truth. You are the God in whom I take refuge. He knows that. But why have you rejected me?

Instead of refuge, I get rejection. Be honest with God about how you see God. You've come to God as the real you. Now let him show you who he really is.

Let him correct your understanding of his person and his purposes. The psalmist knows that God is a place of safety to whom he can run, a refuge in times of trouble.

But God isn't living up to his expectations at the moment. 29 years ago, my wife was burned in a grease fire, the kitchen grease fire.

38% of her body was burned. She spent a month in the burn unit in Mobile, Alabama. Multiple skin graft surgeries.

[ 15 : 55 ] It was awful. It was horrible. And when I was driving in the car following the ambulance as it took her to the hospital that night, I had what I think was my first admission of my wrestling with God, where I said it out loud.

As I was following the ambulance, I banged on the steering wheel. What are you doing, God? Oh, she loves you. She serves you.

She's your daughter. Why are you doing this to her? I was struggling with who he says he is and what I was seeing.

And so was the psalmist. If God is my refuge as he promised he would be, and yet at the same time my circumstances seem to suggest that he's abandoned me, then I have to change the way I think about God.

And I have two choices. I can either believe that God is a liar and he's not my refuge, or I can believe that he is a refuge in a way that I'm not expecting.

[ 17 : 18 ] That his idea of being my place of safety is different than mine. And this is the case. I can either believe what I see or I can believe what he says.

I concluded that steering wheel prayer with just a collapsing in him and saying, but where else can I go?

Only you have the words of eternal life. Only you are life. Like this psalm writer, we must be honest about how we're thinking of God and honest with him about it.

We have to make sure we're talking to the real God as he is, not as we wish he was. So now our psalm writer is frustrated that the real God doesn't seem to be the God he thought he knew. And he feels lost. He feels far away from God, not just physically. He's lost. What do you do when you feel lost?

[ 18 : 35 ] A few years ago, a man in the church I pastored suffered from a severe form of dementia. And one cold night in February, Mike went missing.

He was going out to the mailbox and just kept walking into the woods near the neighborhood. And we were all looking for him.

And when I arrived, when Christina arrived at the house where he lived with his daughter, it seemed like every rescue person and vehicle on the mountain was at their house.

Lights flashing. Everyone was looking. Well, one of our deacons, Joe, got the word, got a text that I sent out about Mike.

And he told me later, he said, as soon as I got the text, I put on my boots and I came to the neighborhood. And he did. And we met him there. And he said, I got to go.

[ 19 : 38 ] And it was like he went right to the place where Mike was sitting stuck in a bramble of branches.

Joe said it was like he was sitting in a big bird's nest. And below him was kind of a drop-off that would go down to Taft Highway. And there was water rushing by.

It was really cold. And Joe, when he found Mike, said to Mike, God sent me to find you, Mike. And Mike looked at him with a smile and said, I know.

Because Mike had been praying that he would be found. When you feel lost, you pray for rescue.

Our psalm writer felt lost, so he prayed for a search party to come find him. Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

[ 20 : 44 ] And so, friends, when we're lost in our pain and our circumstances, we pray. My circumstances have fogged me in, Lord. Lord, it's dark and I'm losing sight of you.

I'm lost in this fog of pain, Lord. Come get me. The world, my flesh, and the devil are lying to me, Lord. They say that you have abandoned me. That you don't really love me.

I'm getting lost in these lies, Lord. Come get me. Send out your light and your truth like a rescue party to find me out here where I am and to bring me to where you are.

Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.

This man wants to be led from where he is to somewhere else. He wants to be brought from where he is to somewhere else. To God is exceeding joy. And that leading and that bringing are going to require him to walk in real repentance.

[ 21 : 55 ] Start with the real you. Talk with the real God. Walk in real repentance. Notice how this man changes the focus of his prayer. In verses 1 and 2, it's all about me, my, me, I, and so on.

In verses 3 and 4, the focus is on God and getting to God and treasuring God as his highest joy. There's been a turn.

Now he's looking for joy, but not joy that can be brought about by pain-free circumstances. No, the text says, to God my exceeding joy.

John Piper preached on this psalm, Psalm 43, right after he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer some years ago.

And Piper has some very helpful things to say about this phrase, to God my exceeding joy. Here's what he said. Notice that there's not a whiff here of praying for vindication over the enemy.

[ 22 : 58 ] That's not in view anymore. Something far greater is at stake now, Piper says. There's a much more important victory to be won than the victory over people or disaster or cancer.

There's a victory far more important, and you can win it even if you die, Piper says. That's what the psalmist is fighting for. Piper says, the final goal of life is God himself experienced as your exceeding joy.

Or, very literally, he says, from the Hebrew, exceeding joy means God, the gladness of my rejoicing. That is God, who in all my rejoicing over all the good things that he has made, is himself, in all my rejoicing, the heart of my joy, the gladness of my joy.

Piper says, isn't this amazing? Here's a man threatened by enemies and feeling danger from his adversaries, and yet he knows that the ultimate battle of his life is not the defeat of his enemies.

It is not escaping natural catastrophe. It is not being healed from cancer. The ultimate battle, Piper says, is, will God be his exceeding joy?

[ 24 : 21 ] Will God be the gladness at the heart of all his joys? So notice now, in verses 3 and 4, the path to exceeding joy.

He says, bring me to your holy hill. Well, that's the temple mount. In Jerusalem. And then he says, bring me to your dwelling.

Well, that's the temple on the mount. Then he says, bring me to the altar. So now we're inside the temple, at the altar, where the sacrifice is offered for sin.

Then, to God, my exceeding joy, he says, that's the holy of holies. Where the glorious presence of God rests on his throne. The mercy seat.

The ark of the covenant. The holy of holies. The place where you can experience God as your exceeding joy. That's where he wants to get.

[ 25 : 29 ] That's where he wants to go. But in order to get to God as your exceeding joy, you have to first go through the altar of God. We have to walk this path of real repentance, asking God to forgive and remove whatever sin is blocking our relationship with him as our exceeding joy.

So at the altar, this man comes to a heart-shattering realization. Not only has he been sent against, verses 1 and 2, he needs to be vindicated, defended, ungodly people, attacking, accusing.

Not only has he been sent against, but the altar tells him he has harmed others. He has been the ungodly, deceitful, unjust, and oppressive person in someone else's life.

Someone else could be praying this same prayer to God for vindication against this man's sin against them. And friends, as I work through this psalm, I have to tell you, Jesus could have said verses 1 and 2 about me.

Vindicate me, Father, and defend me, defend my cause against the ungodly man, Jimmy. I can see him saying this from the cross.

[ 27 : 03 ] From the deceitful and unjust man, Jimmy delivered me. But he didn't deliver him from me.

He delivered me from my sin against him. It's at the altar that we recognize that what is keeping us from enjoying God as our good life is not that we have enemies who have sinned against us, but that we are enemies who have sinned against others and God.

On this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our altar is the cross on which the spotless Lamb of God has been offered up in our place.

It is there that I can see clearly what's keeping me from the Father. And it's there that I can see clearly what the Father has done to make it possible for me to experience him as my exceeding joy. He has put my sin on his son so that I could be a beloved son in whom he is well pleased. The cross is the corrective lens that clears my vision, clears that fog so that I can see God for who he really is.

[ 28 : 27 ] The cross shows me that God is holy, that he has to punish sin. His wrath against my sin is real and full of fury. And he poured it out on Jesus so that I would never have to experience it.

But the cross also shows me that God is love. Yes, his wrath is real and full of fury. But because he loved me, he gave his only son so that I would not perish under his wrath.

It's at the cross that I learned that Christ has already defeated my greatest enemies, sin, death, and Satan. They may attack and accuse, but I have already been vindicated in Christ.

I have already been delivered from my greatest desperation, my desperate need to be delivered from the wrath of God I deserve. At the cross, I see that God has not abandoned me.

He's adopted me. So, here at the cross, I repent of all the ways that I've harmed others and hated God. I cling to the cross and believe the good news again that the greatest roadblock to the true good life, my sin, has been removed.

[ 29 : 46 ] I've been reconciled to God the Father through Jesus the Son by the power of the Spirit. And so, having walked in real repentance and received his real forgiveness, I can finally find my real joy.

We can come to God as our exceeding joy, or as Jesus called it, our first love. I was about a year and a half into planting a church.

And during a prayer retreat, 24-hour prayer retreat, I brought the questions of my thirsty soul to God. I was anxious that this church was going to fail.

So, I took a long walk through that mountain retreat center and just spent a lot of time just looking up into the crisp, clear night sky.

I saw stars and constellations. And I said, I just want to know what's going to happen, Lord. Is this church plant going to make it?

[ 30 : 59 ] What have I gotten us into? I griped to God like the people of Israel moaned to Moses in the desert. Have I invited these people to follow me into the desert to die of thirst, Lord?

Would you have us start Riverside Church just to see it dry up in a matter of months? I waited for an answer from heaven.

But it didn't seem there was a reply written on the night sky. But after some awkward silence, God answered me with a picture.

He doesn't speak audibly to me. He speaks through his word. He speaks through creation. He answered me with a picture. Because my eye all of a sudden was drawn to the Big Dipper constellation.

And it seemed that the Lord was turning the questions on me. Do you see how big that dipper is? You know, a dipper to dip out water.

[ 32 : 08 ] If this dipper was full of water, would it be enough for your thirst? Am I enough for you, thirsty one?

No matter what the future holds, will I be enough for you? He was asking me if I could be his, if he could be my exceeding joy, no matter what happened.

He was reminding me that no matter what the season of drought may come, he would satisfy me. So I want to ask you this morning, what dry place finds you crying out to God with a thirsty heart? Am I enough for you, thirsty one, he says to you? Am I your exceeding joy? He'd like you to know that he is the good life.

He is exceeding joy. And your pain is not a waste of time. Because neither death nor life, nor anything in all of creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

[ 33 : 28 ] Like we heard earlier when Jesus said to the man on the floor, your sins are forgiven, now walk. At this point, at the end of this prayer, you've started with the real you, you've talked with the real God, you've walked in real repentance, receiving his real forgiveness, and finding your real joy in him.

Jesus says to you now, your sins are forgiven. Now I want you to tell your soul to walk. Get up and walk, soul.

And that's how he ends the song in verse 5. Why are you cast down on my soul? You know, in light of all that God has just shown you, why are you cast down on my soul?

And why are you in turmoil within me? Get up. Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my salvation, and my God.

How do we hope in God? What does that look like? When we preach to our souls and say, hope in him, hope in him, hope in him.

[ 34 : 45 ] One of the Puritan preachers, Richard Sibbes, said this, and I'll close with this. Sibbes said, learn much of the Lord Jesus.

For every look at yourself, take 10 looks at Christ. I'll say that again. For every one look at yourself, your circumstances, your sin, take 10 looks at Christ.

He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace. And all for sinners. Even the chief of sinners.

He says, live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eyes settled on you in love.

And repose in his mighty arms. Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in him.

[ 35 : 52 ] Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart. And so there will be no room for folly or the world or Satan or the flesh.

Father, would you let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of our hearts? On this side of the cross and the empty tomb, we are never, ever that far away from the place where our exceeding joy dwells because our exceeding joy, Jesus, lives in us by his Holy Spirit.

Thank you, Father. Help us now. For every one look at our pain, our loss, and even our own sin, let us take 10 looks at Jesus, our exceeding joy.

Let us live much in your smiles. In the sweet, satisfying name of Jesus, I pray. Amen. Amen.