

“In the Cave: My Spirit Faints”  
Psalm 142 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

**A Maskil of David, when he was in the cave. A Prayer.**

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

<sup>2</sup> *I pour out my complaint before him;  
I tell my trouble before him.*

<sup>3</sup> *When my spirit faints within me,  
you know my way!*

*In the path where I walk  
they have hidden a trap for me.*

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *I cry to you, O LORD;  
I say, “You are my refuge,  
my portion in the land of the living.”*

<sup>6</sup> *Attend to my cry,  
for I am brought very low!  
Deliver me from my persecutors,  
for they are too strong for me!*

<sup>7</sup> *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: A Maskil and a Prayer**

Do you ever feel like you should pray but you just don't feel like you know how? It may seem strange to think that a believer would not know how to talk to God, but this has been the common experience of many believers. In fact, I would guess that all believers have struggled at some point in their lives with knowing how to pray. Jesus' disciples asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1), and Jesus taught them the Lord's Prayer.

Many questions have surrounded this issue of how we should pray:

- Should we use pre-written prayers or pray from the heart?
- Should we pray silently or aloud?
- Should we tell God how we really feel or should we tell Him what we think He wants to hear?
- Should our prayers have a certain order or structure to them, or should we just pray whatever comes to mind?

We won't be able to explore all of these questions this morning, but Psalm 142 will provide us with some great insight into how we should pray, especially when we are feeling overwhelmed and find it most difficult to pray.

The title of Psalm 142 says it is a Maskil and a prayer. What does that mean? Well, scholars are divided over exactly what a Maskil is. The best explanation seems to be that it indicates a teaching or instruction. The first psalm titled as a Maskil is Psalm 32, which says, in verse 8, "*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*" The word Maskil in the title is derived from the same word that is translated instruct in verse 8, so it does seem like a Maskil has to do with instruction or teaching.

So, Psalm 142 is both a teaching or instructing psalm and a prayer. This means that Psalm 142 gives us the words David used when he cried out to God from the cave, but that David also wrote it with the express intention of teaching us how we should pray in times of distress.

### **A. Cry: My Spirit Faints Within Me**

David opens Psalm 142 by telling us the nature of his prayer in the cave:

*With my voice I cry out to the LORD;  
with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.  
<sup>2</sup> I pour out my complaint before him;  
I tell my trouble before him.*

David prayed out loud, crying out to the Lord. This is a cry for help, a shriek from someone in distress. David's primal cry is a plea for mercy, a desperate calling out for help. David's plea for mercy uses the same Hebrew word as begins Psalms 56 & 57, which we discussed last week. David is asking God to stoop down and help him, to be merciful and gracious, to condescend to help.

Then David says he was not only crying out loud for mercy, but he was also pouring out his complaint before the Lord, telling the Lord of his trouble. The word for complaint carries with it the idea of murmuring or even babbling, and it expresses the deep anguish that can barely be expressed in words. The word for trouble carries with it the idea of an adversary or a rival, someone who is causing a situation of difficulty, anxiety or distress.

As we read on in Psalm 142, it becomes clear that David is talking to God about both his inward turmoil and distress and the external circumstances that have put him in danger. In verse 3, he speaks of his spirit fainting within him, while in verse 4 and 6, he speaks of his lack of truly reliable allies and of the strength of his persecutors. David cries and murmurs to God about both his fainting spirit within and his persecutors who are too strong for him.

Sometimes we might wonder if we should talk out loud to God or just silently meditate in our hearts. We may wonder if we should primarily focus on how we're feeling inside, the stress and anxiety and

fear we feel, or whether we should be asking God to change our circumstances, to rescue us from the trouble we're experiencing. Here David is teaching us to cry aloud and to tell God of both our internal distress and our external circumstances and to ask for mercy, for condescending help, to deal with both. In other words, we need God to save us inside and out, from the weakness of our hearts and from the powerful persecution of the enemy of our souls. And it does seem that our prayers are more focused, more intentional, more earnest when we do pray aloud, lifting up our voices to cry aloud to the Lord.

After David tells us how he prayed, he then summarizes what he prayed, first in verses 3-4 –

*When my spirit faints within me,  
 you know my way!  
 In the path where I walk  
 they have hidden a trap for me.  
<sup>4</sup>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.*

Last week, we read the other psalm David wrote from the cave, Psalm 57, in which he said twice, “My heart is steadfast.” Here we have lost most of the joyful and confident tone and Psalm 57 as David says, “When my spirit faints within me.” When David says that his spirit was faint, he means that he felt both weak and overwhelmed, both frail and enveloped by trouble. We all know the reality that sometimes we feel bold and confident, joyful and steadfast, while at other times, we feel weak and overwhelmed. However we are feeling inside, the right response is to look to the Lord, to praise Him or to groan before Him.

What makes your spirit faint within you? Is it stress or anxiety when you have an overwhelming amount of work to do? Is it the depth and strength of the sin in your heart, as you're confronted by the ugliness within? Is it having people gossiping about you behind your back? Is it being betrayed by someone you trusted, maybe a spouse or close friend or family member? Is it financial difficulty, not knowing how you're going to pay for something that needs to be fixed or how you're ever going to get out of debt? Whatever the cause, our fainting spirits have but one cure, to look to the One who is stronger and higher than we are.

Psalm 61, another psalm of David, opens with this cry to the Lord –

*Hear my cry, O God,  
 listen to my prayer;  
 from the end of the earth I call to you  
 when my heart is faint.  
 Lead me to the rock  
 that is higher than I,*

*for you have been my refuge,  
a strong tower against the enemy. (Psalm 61:1-3, ESV)*

## **B. Complaint: No One Cares for My Soul**

But David is not just distressed by his own fainting spirit. He also feels completely alone. Among the men hiding with him in the cave, it seems like David has no one he can really trust. David's best friend and truly trusted companion, Jonathan, is in the king's house, the house of his enemy. Even though David's brothers came to him in the cave, we can pick up from 1 Samuel 16-17 that David did not have a great relationship with his brothers. They apparently did not think very highly of him. So David feels alone, with no true help or protection.

Not only does David feel completely alone, but he knows he is being pursued by powerful persecutors and his cave fortress is feeling like a prison to him –

*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! (vv. 6-7a)*

This is all pretty dark and distressing, so where does David find any hope? Where does David look for light in the darkness, for hope in the midst of distress?

## **C. Confidence:**

Of course, David finds light, hope and confidence in the Lord, but how? Well, David finds confidence in the Lord in three distinct ways, in who God is, in what God knows and in what God had promised -

### **I. Who God Is, v. 5**

The first place we see David finding confidence in God is actually in the name he uses for God in this psalm. David consistently calls God, the LORD, which is the Hebrew word, YaHWeH, which is God's covenant name. David calls upon God as the unchanging, self-sufficient, promise-keeping Great I AM YaHWeH!

Then, right after David pours out his complaint,  
“*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.”*

He then prays,  
“I cry to you, O LORD;  
I say, “You are my refuge,  
my portion in the land of the living.”

David may have no reliable human help or support, but his hope and confidence are rooted in who God is to him, his refuge and his portion. These lines remind me of the great hymn, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” in which Charles Wesley writes,

*Other refuge have I none;  
hangs my helpless soul on Thee;  
leave, ah! leave me not alone,  
still support and comfort me.  
All my trust on Thee is stayed,  
all my help from Thee I bring;  
cover my defenseless head  
with the shadow of Thy wing.*

## 2. **What God Knows, v. 3**

Secondly, David also finds confidence in what God knows, specifically how well God knows him. In verse 3, David draws strength in the midst of internal distress and external danger in God’s knowledge of him –

*When my spirit faints within me,  
you know my way!  
In the path where I walk  
they have hidden a trap for me.*

“You know my way” – David is not just saying that God is able to see where David is. This knowledge is a deep, personal, intimate, penetrating knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that David explores in Psalm 139:1-12 –

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me!  
<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.  
<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down*

*and are acquainted with all my ways.*  
<sup>4</sup> *Even before a word is on my tongue,*  
*behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.*  
<sup>5</sup> *You hem me in, behind and before,*  
*and lay your hand upon me.*  
<sup>6</sup> *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;*  
*it is high; I cannot attain it.*  
<sup>7</sup> *Where shall I go from your Spirit?*  
*Or where shall I flee from your presence?*  
<sup>8</sup> *If I ascend to heaven, you are there!*  
*If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*  
<sup>9</sup> *If I take the wings of the morning*  
*and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,*  
<sup>10</sup> *even there your hand shall lead me,*  
*and your right hand shall hold me.*  
<sup>11</sup> *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,*  
*and the light about me be night,"*  
<sup>12</sup> *even the darkness is not dark to you;*  
*the night is bright as the day,*  
*for darkness is as light with you.*

Wherever we are, we can know that God sees and God knows all our internal anguish and all our external danger. God always sees us and knows us perfectly, inside and out.

### 3. **What God Has Promised, v. 7**

So, David finds hope and confidence in who God is and in how well God knows him. But David also finds confidence in what God has promised him:

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

David knows the promises of God and he trusts that he will one day be out of the cave, delivered from his enemies, surrounded by God's people, and praising God for His goodness to him. This is not just wishful thinking for David. He knows what God has promised, and he looks forward to seeing it come to fruition.

God did bring an end to David's time in the caves, and He did so in a marvelous way that vindicated David from slander and relieved him from the pressure of Saul's persecution. We read about this in 1 Samuel 24. David had fled again from Saul to the caves at Engedi. Saul took 3,000 men and went in pursuit of David. As David was hiding in a cave, Saul came in by himself. He did not see David in the darkness, and David was able to cut off the corner of Saul's robe. The men with David wanted him to kill Saul, but David refused. Instead, when Saul left the cave and rejoined his men, David emerged from the cave and showed Saul the corner of his robe that he had cut off.

Confronted by David's clear evidence in front of his men, Saul was forced to confess, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. <sup>18</sup> And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. <sup>19</sup> For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. <sup>20</sup> And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. <sup>21</sup> Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house."

Saul then left the caves and went home, leaving David vindicated and in peace, for a while. Notice that Saul, too, understood by this point the promises of God to David and the glorious future that God had promised to him.

Like David, Jesus, too, found His confidence in God. Specifically, Jesus' prayer life reflects a man who understands who God is, what God knows and what God has promised. Jesus knew that God was His Father, and He called on His Father in all seasons of life. Jesus frequently spent all night in prayer, pouring out His heart to His Father. He taught us to call God, "Our Father," entering into that same intimate relationship that Jesus Himself has with God.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus was preparing to face the cross, His beautiful High Priestly prayer in John 17 opens with these words:

*"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."*

Clearly Jesus knew who God was, what His relationship was with God and what God had promised Him. He had confidence before His Father as He prayed according to His Father's will. And His Father heard His prayer and answered it, as we can see in Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father.

### **Conclusion: What do we do when our spirits faint?**

So what about us? When our spirits faint within us, feeling weak and overwhelmed, what do we do? Do we look for cheap distractions by binge-watching something on Netflix? Do we self-medicate our heartache with food or something else? Or do we look to find our light, our hope and our confidence in the Lord?

David wrote Psalm 142 as a teaching, for us to learn how we are to pray. In our distress, we can cry aloud to the Lord, pouring out our distress before Him. We can call upon Him as our God, faithful and true, and trust in who He is as our refuge and our portion, leaning on His perfect knowledge of us and trusting in His precious promises for us.