

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ. 85203 Phone (480)833-7500

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Number:		Gary L.W. Johnson
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The Psalms and the Theology of Cool-Hand Luke

The movie *Cool-Hand Luke* has become a classic. It starred Paul Newman as Luke and George Kennedy, who won an oscar for best supporting actor. The film is laden with obvious theological themes. Harry Dean Stanton, who plays one of the chain-gang prisoners, sings “Just a Closer Walk With Thee” on the guitar when Luke is visited by his dying mother. After Luke eats fifty hard-boiled eggs in the space of an hour (on a bet), the camera shows an overhead shot of Luke lying on the table poised with his arms spread wide and his ankles crossed depicting a crucifix. During a rainstorm Luke looks up to heaven and calls out to God to show Himself. Defiantly he challenges God to strike him with lightning - anything that would prove that God is actually there. Nothing happens, and Luke says, “Just as I thought, I’m talking to myself in the rain.” When Luke learns his mother has died, he sits alone and strums a banjo and sings about “plastic dashboard Jesus and the Virgin Mary.” The final scene shows Luke (after one of his escape attempts) in an old abandoned church, calling out once more for God (he calls Him “Old Man”) to reveal Himself - but there is only silence. After Luke is shot and killed, the film ends with an overhead camera shot of the chain gang chopping weeds by the side of a two-road intersection that forms a cross. Cool-hand Luke is a Christ figure who rallies the members of the chain gang around him like so many disciples and ends up as a sacrifice. The message of the movie, however, is not inspirational. On the contrary, the film conveys just the opposite message: we are alone and there is no one “up there” looking after us. The Psalmist echoes a refrain very similar to that expressed by Cool-hand Luke. “To You I call, O Lord my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit (Ps. 28:1).” The saints throughout the ages have been subject to similar experiences. The expression “cast down” is how the man of God describes his condition in Ps. 42 and 43. Unlike Cool-hand Luke, the Psalmist was a man who knew God and was faithful in his worship, but circumstances have robbed him of his joy and elation. Sometimes the saints of God experience a desperate struggle not only for the assurance of their acceptance with God, but like Cool-hand Luke, they struggle even with the very existence of God. The late Welsh physician-turned-preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in dealing with these two psalms, makes this very important observation, “Very briefly at this point, the first thing we have to learn is what the Psalmist learned - we must learn to take ourselves in hand. This man was not content just to lie down and commiserate with himself. He does something about it; he takes himself in hand. But he does something that is more important still, which is, he talks to himself. This man turns to himself and says: ‘why art thou cast down O my soul, why art thou disquieted within me?’ He is talking to himself, he is addressing himself.”¹

I. CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE PSALMIST’S DISCOURAGEMENT.

A. Other people taunted him. “Where is your God?” (Ps. 42:3). What good is your theology now! The Psalmist was perplexed, and this only made matters worse.

B. He remembered better days (Ps. 42:4).

C. His location was changed and so were his circumstances (Ps. 42:6). He is not in Jerusalem, but on Mt. Hermon.

D. His memories only made him miserable and more depressed about the future.

- II. HOW DEPRESSION MANIFESTED ITSELF.** The Psalmist was, as Robert Horn points out, “dejected one moment, elated the next. Before him lay majestic scenery, with the cascading mountain stream rushing down nearby. But this reminded him of his own misfortune at God’s hands: ‘all Thy waves . . . have gone over me’ (42:7). He felt he was going under for the last time, until suddenly he remembered that ‘the Lord commands His steadfast love’ (42:8). Then he could even sing and pray. His moods fluctuated constantly up and down.”²
- III. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.** What was it that kept the Psalmist’s head above water? Why is he different from Cool-hand Luke? Even though his present experience was pulling him down, he *knew* there was a God, and this God - his God - had not forgotten him (42:8).
- IV. BACK TO BASICS.** Finding himself in darkness, he did the only thing he could: he prayed for light (Ps. 43:3). Alec Motyer writes, “Nine times the question ‘why?’ rings out in Psalms 42-43. A good time, therefore, to remind ourselves that questions are not doubts. So often a person can be heard to say, ‘I have so many doubts’ when, in fact, all they have is what we all have - ‘so many questions’. And so it will be till we get to heaven (where, very likely, we will be so caught up in glory that the answers will no longer seem to matter). Look at the two halves of the refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5): sure about God (the second half), battered by circumstances (the first half). This is a perfect cameo of life on earth. Don't be afraid to raise questions, just make sure they are believing questions. But sometimes our questions develop a life of their own and take over, and we find ourselves ‘downcast’. This too can happen to any of us, a common hazard arising because we are not yet in glory. What then? A double remedy lies on the surface of today’s psalm. Neither of its components may prove easy, but together they are effective. First look at the sequence of 42:5-6. Verse 5 surely implies that, with God as our hope, we have no need to be downcast; then verse 6 chips in, ‘My soul is downcast.’ What a frank prayer; I know it’s foolish to be down, but I am! This sort of openness with God runs through the psalm - what 42:8 calls ‘a prayer to the transcendent God of my life’. Just as his love never falters, so his ear is always open (8). Think of the middle hours of the night, when sleep flees and anxieties grow a hundred times as big. What then? Have you tried, ‘in the night his song will be with me’? The remedial effect of one of the great hymns of yesterday or today. Then, secondly, there is our mind. Romans 12:1-2 speaks of being transformed ‘by the renewing of your mind, NIV’. The mind is ‘renewed’ by feeding on new thoughts. If we are only being anxious about our anxieties, worrying over our worries, stewing our problems, we are only nourishing the old mind, the downcast spirit. No, says Psalm 42:4, 6, I will turn from old memories, ‘I keep remembering you.’ The mind feeding itself on divine truth, dwelling on the promises of God, recalling his endless mercies and unchanging love, turning its eyes upon Jesus - that mind is walking the pathway of renewal.”³ The Psalmist was in ignorance, so he sought truth. What happened? He reflected on the worship of God - especially the importance of the *altar of God* (Ps. 43:3, 4). This is the OT way of speaking about the sinner’s access and acceptance with God. In other words, the Psalmist is looking at how he is justified. When he considered the absence of the *peace of God*, he directed his attention to how he has *peace with God*. Instead of simply living on the memories of happier days, he reminded himself of the fact and basis of his acceptance with God. Obadiah Sedgwick, one of the Westminster divines, wrote, “Brethren, no man can be free from strong fears and doubts who thinks to be acquitted or condemned by what is in himself. If a man thinks this: ‘The Lord will, or does, enter into judgment with me, and I find nothing to satisfy Him. All the powers of my heart and of my graces are insufficient; and, therefore, there is now no hope but that I shall be cast and condemned.’ You see, here is ground of doubting; yet, if a man could look out of himself and know that his righteousness is to be found in Christ and God has appointed it so, that I am to be justified by that righteousness only, now the soul may have a stay to rest on. Yet my Savior’s righteousness was perfect, was accepted; and He is mine, and His righteousness mine.”⁴

CONCLUSION: The major difference between Cool-hand Luke and the discouraged Psalmist lay in the recognition of how a sinner can be acceptable to God. Cool-hand Luke demonstrated no real awareness of his sinfulness or of God's holiness and was thus indignant that God would not respond to him in some miraculous fashion. The Psalmist, on the other hand, did understand his sinfulness and God's holiness, and therefore saw the basis for his acceptance (justification) with God in terms of the altar of God, i.e., sacrificial atonement. "Justification is not an eraser to rub out depression on the spot. Without a proper understanding of it, however, depression deepens. We need to get such a hold on justification that in the dark day we shall find it holding us. And if it strengthens us in times of spiritual desolation, will it not also help us in all the other experiences and problems of the Christian life?"⁵

Endnotes

1. D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Cause and Its Cure* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 20.
2. R. M. Horn, *Go Free! The Meaning of Justification* (IVP, 1976), p. 88.
3. Alec Motyer, *Psalms by Day: A Devotional Translation* (Christian Focus, 2016), p. 114.
4. Obadiah Sedgwick, *The Doubting Believer: A Puritan Treatise on Assurance* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 37.
5. Horn, p. 92.