

Psalm 142 is a song about the right way to complain.
It is important to be a good complainer.

I know – some people think that complaining is bad.
The problem is that we tend to use the same word “complain”
to mean two very different things.
Sometimes we use the word complain to mean “whiny” –
grumble, grumble, moan, moan, why does it always have to be me?!!

But of course, we have a whole chapter in the Book of Church Order on *complaints*.
A complaint is a petition brought to a proper authority
seeking to remedy *a problem*.

So a complaint is a good thing.

There is no chapter on grumbling – whining.
Grumbling is *always* out of order!!

By the way – parents –
teach your children how to complain!
And then, when they bring a complaint –
when they come to *the right way* (or something close to it!) –
and they try to explain why you are wrong –
pay attention!

And if you deny every complaint –
if you always reject their case –
then you are misrepresenting God!

Because God acknowledged that Job’s complaint against him *was just*.
What was Job’s complaint?
God is coming after me – in spite of the fact that I am innocent.
All this bad stuff that’s happening – *I don’t deserve it!*

Job’s friends were aghast!
How can a man complain against God!!
Can a man be right before God?!!!

But at the end of the book, *God says* that Job’s friends
have not spoken rightly about me, as has my servant Job.

God vindicates Job’s complaint.

Yes, Job – that’s right, you *didn’t deserve that*.
You were my innocent, suffering servant –
foreshadowing the greater suffering servant, my only begotten Son!

Now, we could spend 30 weeks working through Job – like we did a few years ago –
or we could spend 30 minutes working through the same basic principle
in much briefer form,
here in Psalm 142!

Introduction: The Descent into Hell

A Maskil^[a] of David, when he was in the cave. A Prayer.

Psalm 142 opens with a title – A maskil of David.

We don’t quite know what the word ‘maskil’ means.

There are lots of proposals – but it probably refers to the sort of song that it is.

Some think that it was written *by* David –

but as we’ve seen many times,

the term ‘L’david’ could mean

by David, about David, for David, concerning David, etc.

The key to this ascription is that we need to read the first person singular
as a “Davidic” I – David is the first person speaker of the Psalm.

And particularly, the title gives us a particular occasion to include as the backdrop to the song:
“when he was in the cave.”

This refers to when he was pursued by Saul.

David wasn’t king yet.

In fact, King Saul – the King of Israel –

was out hunting David, seeking to kill him.

Our Psalm is reflecting on this story –

in fact, verse 5 uses the key word in Saul’s conclusion regarding David –

so let’s go read it – in 1 Samuel 24.

[read 1 Samuel 24]

There are actually several words from 1 Samuel 24 that work their way into our song –

(prison, persecutor, deal, shut up, rescue

Our psalmist appears to have been reflecting on 1 Samuel 24 –

and also a lot of other Psalms!

There is another song with a similar title in Psalm 57.

For that matter, practically every line in Psalm 142
is drawn from a different place in the Psalter.
There are lines from Psalm 3, Psalm 30, Psalm 102, Psalm 77, and many others!

It's not that the Psalmist went around picking lines from other psalms –
rather, it suggests that the psalmist was so deeply familiar with the rest of the Psalter,
that when he sat down to compose a Psalm,
his mind and his heart were so full of the rest of the Psalms,
that the phrases were woven together in his own composition!

Indeed, my observation is that the best songs are like that!
Until you are so thoroughly grounded in the Psalms
(and the rest of Christian hymnody),
you won't really be able to write anything useful for the church.

What we often call “originality” is generally just idiosyncratic at best!
And idiotic at worst...

You must be mastered by those who have gone before you,
So that their words and thoughts penetrate your heart –
then you will have something useful to say!!

So let us listen to the prayer of God's servant
in the voice of David – in the voice of David's greater Son, our Lord Jesus!

Because when we hear this song in the voice of Jesus,
we realize that the cave is nothing else but the descent into hell.

Our Lord Jesus was buried in a cave.
And this is the prayer of Jesus – the suffering servant –
as he brought his complaint to God from the depths of the grave!

1. When I'm in Trouble, I Complain (v1-2)

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

This is the absolutely necessary starting point for all complaints!!
“With my voice...”

If I remain silent, I will perish.
If I remain silent, nothing will change.
No one will know.

Without *words* there is no complaint!

A good complainer knows where to take his complaint!

Think about it this way:

if the *problem* is that your boss is horribly mistaken –

then the *solution* is to talk with your boss –

or to talk with someone who will be able to communicate with your boss.

Now many people will just grumble to their colleagues.

They might *say*, “Someone should talk to the boss” –

but what they *really* mean is “grumble, grumble, grumble,

I don’t like this, but what’s the point – nothing’s going to change!”

It may be necessary to talk with some friends first

in order to formulate your complaint and figure out how – and whether –

the complaint should be brought –

but the *point* of all your conversation about the problem

should be how to make things right.

And the first place – and the best place – to learn this?

Is prayer.

If you get good at coming to the God of the universe with your complaints –

then you can complain to anyone!

With my voice I cry out to the LORD.

With my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD!

I pour out my complaint before him.

I tell my trouble before him.

Notice the tone here.

You see both honesty and respect.

There’s no whining here.

No grumbling.

I’m gonna tell God the truth about my situation –

I will *pour out* my complaint!!

I will tell my troubles!!

But I remember who I’m talking to!

I cry out to the LORD!

I plead for mercy to the *one who can do something about it!!*

I think that a lot of times our “complaints” before God

aren't really addressed to *God*.
We don't really think that he's listening.
Or, perhaps better, we don't really believe in him at all!
If you were talking to the sovereign Lord of the universe,
I suspect that you would have a tone of respect!

But instead, we just whine and grumble to ourselves –
ignoring the fact that the sovereign Lord of the universe *is* actually *right there*.

We are like petulant children –
whining and crying because Daddy won't give us ice cream!
But we have a good Father.
He knows us.
And he will not abandon us to the grave.

So listen to Jesus as he teaches us how to complain!

Verse 3:

2. A Path of Traps Where No One Cares – But You Know (v3-4)

³ *When my spirit faints within me,
you know my way!*

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

⁴ *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.*

If that was partially true of David –
how much more was it true of Jesus!
One disciple – one of the twelve – had betrayed him.
Another had denied him *three times*.

At the cross they had all left him.
There is none who takes notice of me.
No one cares for my soul.

My only refuge is the grave.

Think about it:

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

How can I avoid the trap?

Stay in the cave.
There is no way out.
 There is no way to avoid the trap.
 The trap is in the “path where I walk.”

That’s my path.
That’s the only way I can go!

And it’s booby-trapped.

There is no way out.
 They’ve got me right where they want me!!

When my spirit faints within me, you know my way!
 This is why I bring my complaint to *you*.
 Because *you* are the one who can *do something* about it!

Do you believe that?

Do I?

If we believed it – we would be much, much more of a *praying* people!
 When we talk about our problems and circumstances,
 if we believe that *God* is the one who knows our ways –
 then we will pray.

So the starting point for any complaint
 is recognizing who is part of the story!

Who is God?
 “You know my way”

Who am I?
 I am weak – I am fainting

And what is my problem?
 I am in a cave – trapped – under attack – helpless – alone.

So a good complaint recognizes who are the parties – what is the situation –
 and then, finally, includes a petition to *do something about it!!!*

(verse 5:)

3. My Cry from Prison – Bring Me Out and Surround Me with Your People (v5-7)

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

Pretty clearly, David's sojourn in the cave – in the underworld, as it were – suggests that his place in the land of the living is precarious at best! The implication is that David is at the edge of the grave (Jesus, of course, went over the edge...)

Verse 5 reiterates the *you* and the *I*.
But now more positively – and with a view toward the future!
I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.”

There is *some truth* in the “name it and claim it” movement!
(Not much – mind you! – but some!)
Words *are* powerful.

I say you are my refuge.
Even in David's cave.
Even in Jesus' grave!
I will say it – even in my darkest moments!
I will say it – even when I am afraid!
I will say it – even when Satan would try to convince me that I have no future!!

You are my refuge – my portion in the land of the living!!!

This is essential to all good complaints!
What is the point?!
Where are we going?!
Why am I bringing this complaint?!

This is why you have to teach your children how to do it!
Because right now, he just wants ice cream –
he needs to learn that there is something – no, there is *someone*
better than ice cream!

You are my refuge – you are my portion in the land of the living!

What I want is *you*.
The things that charm me most on earth are fleeting.
They will pass away into dust.

I will pass away into dust.

But *you* are my portion in the land of the living!

Therefore – and our text is so abrupt that it leaves out any conjunction at all!!

⁶ *Attend to my cry,
for I am brought very low!*

Such is the confidence of the Psalmist!
Such is the confidence of David in the cave – the Lord’s anointed –
who would not reach out his hand against Saul,
because he *knew* that he could not become king by assassinating Saul!

You do not become Messiah by villainy!
You do not establish the kingdom of Christ [the kingdom of Messiah]
by murder.

And perhaps that helps us understand the cry of Jesus from the grave!
Attend to my cry – for I am brought very low!

Jesus could not overcome sin and death in any other way!
He could not establish the kingdom of Messiah by rebellion!
If he acted unlawfully – if he refused his mission –
there would be no salvation for the human race!

He had to be brought *very low* – even under the power of death for a time –
under the wrath and curse of God.

The Creator had become a creature.
The Lawgiver had come under his own law –
indeed, under his own curse.

And therefore he cried:

*Deliver me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me!*

He had the power of an indestructible life –
and yet he submitted himself to death.
He could have called down a host of angels to rescue him –
but for us – and for our salvation – he took our weakness and frailty,
and endured the grave for a time.

The complaint from the cave also recognizes where the story is going!!

⁷ *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.

Verse has two parts –
my own gratitude –
and the new community that will emerge when the King is enthroned!

When you bring a complaint to God –
or to anyone else, for that matter –
you should conclude by showing them how doing the right thing
will be *good* – for everyone – including them!

You know, boss, if you do this – it will be good for business.
It's okay to say that!
David says it to God –
“Bring me out of prison, *that I may give thanks to your name*” –
and oh, by the way, if you do this, then your kingdom will grow too!!

Jesus says, “here am I and the children God has given me” –
The faithful will surround me because of the way you deal with me.

Because Jesus complained to the Father,
therefore the Father heard him and gave him all that he asked!

And now Jesus calls you learn from him to pour out your complaint before Father!
He is a good Father.
He will hear your complaints!
And when you are right, he will agree with you!