

Time of Grace Ministry
Here I Am Lord: With My Fears and Doubts
Psalm 43
December 3, 2017

Pastor Michael Novotny

Whenever a couple gets married at my church, I send them a massive and personal premarital survey. And one of the most important questions that I ask that I'm always looking forward to the answer to is the question, "What scares you the most about marriage?"

The answers that I get back to that question always tend to begin with the words, "What if." What if he changes? What if she gets sick? What if we go through problems? What if our marriage doesn't make it? Now whether you're single or married, divorced or widowed, those two words have probably plagued your heart with doubts and with fears. What if I can't pay these bills? What if it's cancer? What if God can't forgive the thing that I did last night? What if God can't fix this? What if I won't make it?

Well today, Pastor Mark Jeske is going to dive into those questions; that we can go before God in all honesty and transparency and he knows exactly how to deal with our doubts and our fears.

Pastor Mark Jeske

You know that there is trouble in your head and in your heart. For one thing, the devil is not going to leave you alone. Do you think he just gave up and is now going to let you slide into heaven? No chance. He still thinks he's in it. He's in it to win it so he's after you and he cannot take you away from Christ by force so he does the next best thing. He's going to try to whisper to you to persuade you to commit spiritual suicide. And he's going to whisper things that will undo what Easter did.

One of the most astonishing accounts in all of Scripture is not just that Jesus rose from the dead and that alone would be worth the entire Bible if all we had were a couple of verses that said Jesus is alive, we'd have enough to give us hope. But think about what that day was like and its impact on the people around Jesus – his disciples, the women who would travel with him and did a lot of the supporting work, helping them manage the people and find a place to sleep and find stuff to eat. They had – there really was like a traveling entourage and Jesus had a personal touch with most of those people on the very first day of his coming alive again. But it was a miserable day for all of them along with the joy.

So I'd like you for to just resonate in sympathy – not with a judgmental spirit – the different people Jesus ran into and that his angels encountered on Easter Day; every one of whom had a miserable day. In fact, I don't know that they were completely at peace even by nightfall. They were all jumbled up inside because of their confusion, their doubts, and their doubts made them afraid. Mary Magdalene was weeping, though she had heard the good news that Jesus had risen, she was still crying when Jesus found her. When these – when a group of women; probably Mary Magdalene and another Mary and a woman named Salome and a woman named Johanna

encountered Jesus on the road a little bit later that morning – they wanted to tackle him and hold onto him and he told them you kind of have to let go of me. But they went on their way afraid; still afraid. They had just seen him do what he said he was going to do but still afraid. And you might want to say, “How can this be?” I know how it can be because that’s me. I still have mess in my own head and I work at this a lot. I’ve got to believe that you’re in that same boat, too; that you have your moments of confidence but that sometimes life intervenes and Satan’s whisperings cause you to misinterpret what is going on in your life as God is disengaged or maybe he was never there in the first place. God maybe was around to start this world up and like a watchmaker and wound it up but he lost interest and is off in some other galaxy and we’re on our own. We’re struggling all by ourselves now and have to fend for ourselves. Whatever we get out of this life, we have to make it for ourselves because he’s not engaged. He’s not doing anything for us.

Feeling vulnerable to Satan’s cruelty and the people that he drives. Feeling physically at risk. Being afraid for your physical well-being. Maybe you’ve been smacked around financially and your own – you’re not middle aged or even heading for retirement – retirement from what? You can’t afford to retire; you’re living paycheck to paycheck now. You’re living day-to-day right now. You’ve got nothing saved up and you’re thinking, God, where are you? I’m living hand to mouth here.” Like, hey? Hello? Question from the back: Where are you? I thought I am the princess or the prince in your royal family. Where are you? I call out to you and why is my family so dysfunctional? I’m calling out to you because my marriage is in trouble and I’m not seeing anything happen. We want to see stuff and while we’re waiting, our patience wears thin and Satan says, “See? He doesn’t care. See? He’s powerless. See? He’s absent. See? I told you he’s not involved in your life.” And God allows us to be tested in that way. You can argue with him about that if you want but he thinks it’s better that you face challenges in your life as he faces challenges in his life, his experience with us.

So I’d like to dig into one of the psalms with you to kind of process where you go with this stress. Our lives really are stressful, aren’t they? Technology, which is supposed to make our lives better, really does but it also makes them faster. Can you keep up? I can’t hardly even keep up with the speed at which stuff is changing and things are happening. The faster communication goes, all that means is you get barraged with more and more and more requests for communication. I can’t keep up. And no matter how much I try to get on top of this, technology outruns me and is always two or three laps ahead of me on the track and I just don’t feel like I can keep up.

I don’t see God engaged in my life the way I see my family engaged in my life. And so out of sight, out of mind. I fantasize or imagine that I must be on my own; that I’ve got to tackle everything by myself. And after you’ve been punched a few times – I think it was Mike Tyson who said, “Everybody’s got a great plan for life until you get punched in the face for the first time” – and your plan goes right out the window. Everybody’s got a plan but when life punches you in the face, I don’t blame you if you also feel doubts. Where are you God? Don’t you like me? Where is the help I need? Why am I so struggling still at this point? I do love you. Aren’t I doing what I’m supposed to be doing? Where are you? Why is this so hard?

Go with me, if you would, to Psalm 43 because this is not a new cry for mercy; a cry for relief. This is an old cry. It's the cry, basically, of all believers. Psalm 43 is one of a set of a dozen that are called the Psalms of the Sons of Korah. That's like a musical guild. It's an association of poets and musicians and they took the craziest name you could ever imagine. It's almost as bad as being called, let's say, the Sons of Hitler. And you'd say what organization would want to be known as the Sons of Hitler? Germany's worst monster – it is a synonym for somebody who is cruel and evil, right? In fact, the name Adolf has pretty much disappeared from the face of the earth; nobody would name a kid that even though 150 years ago it was a very common name – not anymore.

Korah was a Levite who didn't want to be just a Levite; he wanted to be a priest, he wanted to be in control. He wanted to do the religious leadership of the people of Israel his way. And even though he was very close to the top – a great grandson of Levi, himself – he was not of the tribe of Aaron and so couldn't be a priest. But he and a bunch of similar rebels – 250 of them – and his two buddies, Dathan and Abiram, staged a rebellion against Moses and God said to Moses, "Tell everybody to get away from those three people – Korah and his two fellow ringleaders. The nation is going to see how I regard this direct assault on my word and my instructions," and fortunately, for them, everyone cleared away and kind of let them stand in the middle so they and their families and their tents were like on an island and all of a sudden, God made a – number 16; you can read about this – the earth just split open – and Korah and his ringleaders and their families and possessions, tents and livestock, everything that was connected to them fell into that chasm that opened up right underneath their feet and God just said, "Close" and the earth came together – whoosh! And there was no crack any longer and they simply disappeared and were absorbed back into the earth. It doesn't say this in the Bible but I think I know what Moses said next. Here's what he said. Any questions? There were no questions. Point taken.

But here's the crazy thing: There still were some of his children and grandchildren around and they went back to serving the Lord with all their heart. In fact, they redoubled their efforts and got known for being terrific worship leaders and by the time of King David – maybe six or eight or ten generations later – they had so many of them, they formed their own musicians guild and at David's time, each of the three branches of the Levites had lead poets from each of the three branches of the Levites who contributed poems and all three of those branches are represented in the songbook, the psalm book, of 150 – Heman was one of them; he was from the Koath side. And Asaph was another; you've run into that name before. There are a dozen Asaph songs; he's a fellow poet and musician like David. And the Sons of Korah wrote a dozen psalms and Psalm 43 arguably is not even a separate psalm because it looks like it really belongs with Psalm 42 and some of the versions of the Old Testament Scripture actually have – they don't have a separate number for this one; it's actually joined together with 42 – and you can tell why because it has a similar ending refrain. The refrain: "Why are you so downcast, O my soul?" occurs three times in the two psalms together. And so if you choose to think of this – and it doesn't have a heading, either – and all the other psalms of Korah have a heading. So this very well could be basically the finale to Psalm 42.

But I'd like to consider Psalm 43, just that little chunk with you, and I would like you to like put a piece of tape on here or someplace to go put a sticky note in your Bible at home where you can go back and find it for when Satan is working on your brain and your heart and he is getting you

confused again, he's getting you doubting again, you feel that panic starting, you feel the depression starting, the dark clouds are starting to gather overhead, you have that feeling like Korah that the walls are closing in like you're sliding into a pit, where stuff is not working, where as hard as you trying you cannot seem to climb out of the hole that you're in, here is where you're going. And you know what? Jesus and his friend "me," neither of us have any scorn for you if you are honest in saying to God, "Here I am, Lord, but man, I'm telling you, there is doubt in my insides and I'm honest – I'm telling you Lord – I'm afraid because my life is squirting away beyond my control and I feel powerless to stop it. Help!" Here's where you go. Let's take a look at it.

Psalm 43 – one of the psalms of the Sons of Korah. This guild of people who used the name of this horrible rebel, I think, were showing that we are not destined to repeat his evil sins. We can change our identity. We're not locked into what our ancestors did. So it became a point of redemptive pride that they used this horrible name for now a group of people who were poets and musicians, crafting music for the worship life of the Israelite people.

Here's how it starts: "Vindicate me, O God." Like somehow can you please let it look like I belong to you? Right now it looks like people who have no use for you are harassing me and making my life miserable. "Plead my cause against an ungodly nation." It looked like your own country was turning on you. "Rescue me from deceitful and wicked men." I'm being abused by others.

"You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?" Think about that – here's the Sons of Korah – these are the lead musicians and in all honesty, one of them actually outed himself and said, "Lord, no offense," you know, whenever somebody says "no offense," they're always going to say something offensive. Do you ever notice that? You know what I mean, right? Like when I say, "No offense, but your hair is really lousy today," – oh thanks! Good thing you didn't intend any offense. "No offense, but man, you're packing on a little weight. You better push yourself away from the table." No offense? Too late.

No offense, God, but why have you rejected me? It feels like you've dumped me, too. Where are you? I don't see you around. There's no help coming my way. I'm struggling here and now I'm drowning. Where are you? Are you – and Satan's saying, "See? He's senile. See? I told you. He's gone. His throne is empty. He left the house. He's not home." "Lord, where are you?" "He can't hear you. There's nobody but you and me. I am the lord of earth. Talk to me if you want stuff to happen." "Lord, help!" "He's not listening to you." And doubts creep in. The same doubts that led Jesus' closest associates – the ones who most had heard his word – to have a miserable Easter day because even angels from heaven and Christ himself did not take the doubt and fear out of their minds.

"You're God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" I thought you defeated Satan. It looks like he's ruling this world. The only way to get ahead is to cheat and to use violence and threats and intimidation and dishonesty. That's what I see all around me. That's how you get ahead. Where are you? Lord, here's the plea – in verse three – "Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me." I need some light on my path. It's really dark in my life right now. I don't know what's going on.

Send some light so I know where I'm going so I know what to think. Send some light so I can see better. I'm staggering through my life because I keep getting surprised and blindsided. I'm sick of being blindsided. Help me see what's coming ahead.

“Send some light. Send your truth.” I'm sick of the lies. I want to know where you are and what you're up to. Let them guide me. “Let them bring me to your holy mountain, the place where you dwell so I can go to the altar of God.” Sometimes the holy mountain of God is a reference to Mount Sinai in the Sinai Desert where the covenant was established and the first giving of the law with Moses' two stone tablets. Very often, or more often, Holy Mountain means Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem is built and metaphorically, the temple mount and platform – once called Mount Moriah, which is where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac that one time – that is the holy mountain of God. Let me get back to the place where your glory dwells; that bright glory cloud. And if I'm there, at least I'll be reassured that you still are on the premises; that you haven't abandoned this planet and abandoned me. I need to know. Make it feel like I'm right there at your holy mountain; the place where you dwell.

“I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.” I want to make music to you but right now I'm not feeling it because I'm feeling doubtful and I'm feeling fearful. Lord, talk to me. Make my path a little bit straighter. And there's a happy ending; this little refrain: “Why are you so downcast, O my soul?” Like, hey, heads up, “Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” I believe – hey, self, God has not spoken his last word. This ain't over! There's more good stuff coming. Relax. Deep breath. Think.

How does God do that in our lives? When you're drowning, when you feel depressed, when the heavy cloud is pressing down on you, when your heart feels like lead? First of all, look back at all the times he's rescued you before and realize that your life has been full of interventions from God to make your life better. Satan tries to have a poisonous breath of amnesia to forget all of the things you have received from God and make you feel like a beggar and a pauper. Not true. Take inventory of how rich you are in blessings in the past. Look at what Jesus did on the cross – went all the way there and what looked like massive failure to our eyes – was in fact the crushing of the head of Satan. From his cross, the heel of the champion as promised to Eve came down and crushed the head of the devil. Look at that if you are suspecting that Satan is really the ruler of this world. He is not. He is a mortally wounded serpent who is thrashing around with his last little bits of strength. He is a loser. He has already lost. And the resurrection of Jesus drives out our doubts. Reimbibe of that great nectar, that beautiful, sweet, cold water that can drive out the thirst of your doubts and fears. He is alive! This guarantees to me the forgiveness of my sins. Guarantees to me that God looks at me with favor. Guarantees the fact that I am loved unconditionally. Guarantees that God's holy angels are on duty; protecting me from things I cannot even see. And for me to hurl complaints at God – “If I don't see you working for me” – and he says, “Of course you can't; you can't see what I'm doing for you.” Same as my own children have not even seen probably 80 percent of what I have done for them in their lives; all behind the scenes – most of it when they were too young even to know. The fact that they didn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't there. Why should I think that God would be any different a parent from me? Most of what parents do is invisible to their children and that's okay. But we just need to cut him some slack that he is doing stuff to make our lives better.

Take inventory of the people around you. We are rich in relationships to encourage one another and the sweet thing is not all of us are crashing and burning at the same time. So reach out; do not worry about bothering or annoying somebody else. By being part of a congregation, this is our buddy system. We're taking care of each other. Listen to the encouraging words that you hear from the people around you. Reach out a hand to somebody you know is struggling. Let them have the honesty to come out with their doubts. They're really wondering if all this stuff really happened and go back to the word and especially, go back to the Easter word that he is alive. That means I'm loved, I'm somebody, I'm chosen, I'm covenanted with God, I'm basking in his favor, he's smiling at me right now. He's going to give me everything – maybe not everything I want – but everything I need for today. And then tomorrow will come a new shipment and he'll have for me what I need tomorrow.

It's not up to me to try and control how I serve him but rather, as a servant, I should look at Lord, what's my life situation? How have you prepped me and what opportunities and platform have you given me to be useful for you? And then I'm going to let go, I'm going to let go of all my feeble attempts to be in control, and I'm going to say, "I'm blessed. I'm loved. I'm forgiven and I'm immortal." Who needs anything more than that? He's alive. I'm alive spiritually now and I'm going to be alive with him forever. In the meantime, let's have a little fun and when life turns into a crazy roller coaster and you realize there's no steering wheel and there's no brake pedal and there's no accelerator pedal and you're just strapped in and you're going around, there's only one thing to do when you're on a roller coaster and realize you have no control and what's that? Woohoo! Enjoy the ride!

Pastor Michael Novotny

Whenever you face a doubt or a fear, you could remember the words that Pastor Jeske just spoke with us. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of words of comfort that bring us back to God's love and his presence. Or if you don't have as much time, you could speak just one single word. About 500 years ago, the great pastor, Martin Luther, said that you only need one word to deal with your doubts, your fears, and your temptations. And the word is "liar." Whenever our spiritual enemy assaults us, whenever he makes us feel less than, whenever we wonder what if this happens, Luther suggested just one word: Liar. And so, when you feel unlovable, unforgiveable, like Jesus couldn't take care of that thing that you struggle with, say that word: Liar. Whenever you're nervous or anxious about this situation is going to turn out, this medical exam, this family struggle, this thing happening at work, say that one word out loud: Liar. Whenever you feel like God's love doesn't quite reach a person like you, say it as loud as you can and that one word will resist the enemy and make him flee: Liar. Because God's love and God's grace is the truth. Because Jesus, our Savior who's your personal Savior, said I am not just the way and the life. He said I am the truth. So call the enemy a liar and cling to your Savior Jesus Christ.

Will you now join me and pray?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your word. Thank you so much for speaking so clearly to us that we never have to doubt that you will always keep your promises. You say in

the Scriptures that every promise you have made to us is "yes" in Jesus Christ. All the blessings, all the goodness, all the mercy, all the grace, they are always ours because of what Jesus did.

We pray, Father, for our brothers and sisters who are in the valley and in the shadow; those wrestling with doubts and depression. Those who feel unlovable and unforgiveable. Would you reach out to them directly through your Holy Spirit? Or would you reach out indirectly through us, through our compassion and kindness, that they could find the comfort that we have found in your Son, Jesus Christ? We need your presence, Lord, so speak to us clearly and remind us of your unfailing love. We pray all these things in Jesus' powerful name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny, and it all starts now.