

“Thirsting for God”

Psalm 42 and 43
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The Psalms have always functioned as a book of common prayer. Each of the psalms can also serve also as a source of poetic worship. Many of the psalms make the act of speaking them aloud, which itself is “worship,” which is the chief end of everything that has breath. In the psalms of praise, the psalmist leads the cosmic chorus in giving voice to "Kings of the earth and all peoples" and to "mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars" (Ps. 148:9, 11). We sense the majesty of God throughout the psalms’ poetic images. In addition to discovering the joyful noise of words and music in thanksgiving, we are given the powerfully honest words of the psalmist looking to God for personal needs. Last week, we studied Psalm 17, which was a lament and a prayer for deliverance from personal enemies, trusting that we each are “the apple of God’s eye,” a comforting reassurance.

Today’s psalm 42 is another lament. It is one in which the psalmist calls upon God to help him in his private distress, for someone who has been separated from the temple by either an illness or by having become a refugee, now far from home. In either case, the author has been unable to worship at the temple, which was the place for Hebrew people where one could worship and “encounter” God. The psalmist has at one time known God’s glorious touch; he has “tasted” the experience and longs for it again, deep in his soul. The psalm conveys a deep longing, a longing totally appropriate to the Lenten season of waiting, preparing and anticipating our empty souls to be filled in Easter’s glorious resurrection. Let’s read it responsively:

Psalm 42 Longing for God and His Help in Distress

To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.

¹As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

²**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.**

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

³My tears have been my food day and night,

while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’

⁴**These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:**

how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,

with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help ⁶and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;

therefore I remember you

from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

⁸**By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.**

⁹I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?'

¹⁰**As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'**

¹¹Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

The very first line of Psalm 42 suggests a scenario behind the text: something is keeping the psalmist away from being able to be with the community in worship. It may be an illness, an inability to make pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple, the taunt of others who treat bad health as a sign of divine disfavor, or may be of someone who's fled and is now far away from home. Yet the psalmist persistently holds to his hope that the soul now cast down will once again be raised up, able to commune with God.

That longing for God is a classic theme at the heart of Christian tradition of spirituality. At the beginning of Augustine's *Confessions*, a book notable as the first written account of one's own inner spirit, Augustine speaks about an inborn need for God that only God can satisfy: "*Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*" This psalmist locates us in our bodies, and asks us to imagine something more urgent than restlessness: a hunger and thirst that is desperate. A deer, driven almost mad by the heat of the sun and stumbling across a desert landscape in exhaustion, suddenly comes upon water. In my mind's eye, I see this deer bending his neck and just ready to quench his thirst. And while a trickle between the rocks would have been enough, suddenly there are flowing streams, "living water," in abundance. And with powerful images of the sea, the psalmist conveys the sheer magnitude of the

blessing, in verse 7: "*Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.*" This fullness – his thirst sated completely-- is, at least, the *hope* of the psalmist. So these first two verses give us what theologians call the *sitz in leben*, the “situation” of the psalmist.

In the next verses, there’s also a hint—a big one--that this psalmist has been depressed. The psalmist, who is dying of thirst, has been crying. His only sustenance has been the salt of his own sorrow (verse 3): "*My tears have been my food day and night.*" What is more, he badgers himself with words others have taunted him asking, "*Where is your God?*" Those are words we find in the Gospels aimed toward Jesus at the end of his life. The glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving of the entry into Jerusalem with palms and praise so quickly morphed into the crowds mocking him, asking him again and again, "*Where is your God?*" “You’re in dire straits: why doesn’t your God save you?” And Jesus was silent, until he cried from the cross (Mt. 27:46) the opening line of Psalm 22, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Here was Jesus, who gave the woman at the well Living Water, and who said, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn. 6:35). is brought to a low point of surrender and anguish, solitary on the cross, crying out for God’s presence.

Isn’t this a question that rises to the surface in the midst of tragedy or suffering in our own lives? When we are cast low, when we begin to wonder ourselves about faith, the taunt again appears, "*Where is your God?*"

Not surprisingly, throughout Christian history, the literature on the spiritual life has always held this lament in a central place. The actual experience of God is often described not as one of “fulfillment” but of “**longing**,” not of contentment, but **desire**; not being satisfied or satiated, but **hungering and thirsting**. Just as the psalms continue to wonder where God is, so Christian theologians have come to recognize that in many ways “God comes to us not as presence we perceive, but as a **distance felt**; not as love consummated, but **desire kindled**.” (Stephen Brachlow, “Longing for God,” 2010.)

Augustine’s spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, is a good case in point. The book is a long prayer that reveals a heart deeply moved by his

unfulfilled desire for God. In his forties Augustine had finally come to faith, and writes, “*O God, you shattered my deafness, you sparkled, you blazed, you drove away my blindness. You shed your fragrance, and I drew in my breath, and now I pant for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me and now I burn with longing for your presence.*” (*The Confessions*, p.).

The classic spiritual texts agree on this one thing: it is our longing, our hunger, our thirst for God, it is the experience of inner poverty, even—at times—despair, that keeps sending us back to God, longing for the fulfillment only God can give. Indeed, this longing is itself often understood to be a sign of God’s presence. Just having the longing, in the first place, is a sign that God IS, that God exists, that there is—as C.S. Lewis wrote—“a God-shaped vacuum” in us that God alone can fill. And Psalm 42 expresses such longing as a deer that thirsts, a soul cast down, tearfully awaiting God’s presence.

It was not always this way for him, this one who is solitary and depressed. In verse 4, he recalls a time when he was not alone in the desert, but was part of a crowd on its way to experience God’s blessings in the Jerusalem temple: *“These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.”* He recalls being part of the worshiping community, where his roots of faith yet remain; he clings to the memory! Jewish people to this day also remember and recite the story of Moses with God’s deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt – every Passover. To this day, they repeat this story, just as we repeat the story of Jesus: his birth and life, the Last Supper, his death and Easter’s resurrection. I believe each of you remember moments that unveiled God’s presence in our life – perhaps it was a candlelight worship or a baptism that made you weep, or in the palm-waving parade of children, or a private moment when your sense of the divine presence was so immediate and full that you felt and knew God’s presence and blessing in your life. We cherish these moments!

Sometimes we come upon circumstances that throw us into the pit. Older people –single and alone--have spoken about the lack of human touch and caring that drives them into the abyss. Those who are alone or ill, or confined, or those who are refugees or travelers far from their homes, away from loved ones, may all repeat the same, desperate words full of longing.

And in such times, especially in times of despair, we find ourselves longing to sense God's presence, the One in whom we have put our faith and trust.

In a church I served in Mankato, Minnesota, one Sunday a member stood before the congregation and described an intensely painful and dark time (Mankato First, 1996). John told us he had grown up in his church, but had drifted away in his adult years. While he had a dear young son, he'd made a mess of his marriage. John suffered from depression and he saw only his failure and hopelessness. He was in the valley of the shadow, and deeply discouraged and had been sleeping away much of his days, a symptom of depression. Late one morning, when he awoke, he read a note from his 8-year-old son wishing he could have awakened his dad before he went to school. John took this as a sign that he had again failed at being a dad, not even there for his son. He wanted even more to end it all right then. But one small thought held him back: he did not want to have that dear son be the one to find him when he came home. And it led him to dial a rehabilitation clinic nearby, even though he had little idea that rescuers would come to his door because of that call.

What made him pick up the phone? I think besides the love for his son, in his parched soul, Christ was yet there calling to him of hope of living waters to quench his thirst. John noted that while in treatment, one thing that buoyed him was his memory of the faith community that had loved and included him and had kept reaching out to him. Returning to health included his return to worship and fellowship in his church community. John's was courageous and humble in sharing his story with the whole congregation that day, and encouraged us by his pivotal moment of trust—a miraculous moment. He allowed us to include him—and other strugglers like him—more sensitively in journeying together as followers in Christ.

. In the midst of pain, God stirs up in the dry ashes an ember of the memory, which renews hope for the future. A man at the end of his rope decides to hope against all the odds, to remember the Rock when he feels himself to have been crushed. The refrain, "*For I shall again praise him, my help and my God,*" repeats itself twice in Psalm 42, and again in Psalm 43. The steadfast, persistent presence of a loving God is with us, seeking us out in our isolation, ready to quench our dry and parched souls with living water. You ask "How?" In part, it is, friends, you and me, the people of faith, who enact this love by sharing a meal, by visiting, by praying with another, by connecting and upholding, by worshiping together, by sharing our faith to seek and save the lost.

The psalms give us a language for despair. When we are full of fear and pain and darkness, giving up is so easy. The young Canadian skater, whose mother died just two days before her event, could have given up. Instead, she steeled herself to skate toward a bronze medal and the crowd's ovation lifted her in her pain. I wonder that the church can surround and uplift those in our midst, and those outside our walls, who are wounded and in pain, loving them and cheering them on to hold on to hope.

A deer crashes through the desert's underbrush, hunting for the water that can keep it alive. *"Where is your God?"* echoes in the dry air. A man at the end of his rope decides to hope against all the odds, to remember the Rock when he feels himself to have been left in the dust: *"For I shall again praise him, my help and my God."* The Psalms give us a way to howl as well as to praise, permission to bewail the darkness, and permission to hold on to a vision of light, a vision of water flowing into our own dry, parched souls, a vision of hope.

Pray with me:

Dear God, you alone have given us such deep thirst and longing for you. When we are isolated and afraid and empty, place within us each all that we need: first, the memory of your presence, of your unfailing love, of the songs of faith and prayers, and hope, for you are our God in this life and the life to come. Amen.