

It may be that the psalmist is in exile, under the control of a foreign power (Psalm 43:1), surrounded by enemies who continually pose the question, *"Where is your God?"* (Psalm 42:3b, 10). The question summons images of Samson being taunted by the Philistines (Judges 16:23-25) or David being mocked by Goliath (1 Samuel 17:41-47). The question emphasizes the psalmist's estrangement from God and dispossession from the Temple. For the psalmist, there is seemingly no access to God or to any place where word and sacrament, praise and prayer may be offered to God.

Although the psalmist's exact location is unknown, the psalm does offer some tantalizing hints. The land of Jordan and of Hermon (Psalm 42:6) in the northernmost region of Israel, near Dan, and around the area of Caesarea Philippi, is the site of magnificent waterfalls which swell in the spring thaw. Mount Mizar (Psalm 42:6), "the little mountain," may refer to a hill in the vicinity, or it may stand in contrast to God's holy mountain, Zion in Jerusalem, where the psalmist desires to be (Kirkpatrick, 230). The ambiguousness of these psalms allow them to function as a symbol of our own displacement and estrangement from God. The lack of specificity gives the psalms a universal feel, applicable to every person, in every age, in every circumstance. This endows the psalms with great power and hope to comfort us in our discontent.

It is painfully evident that the psalmist feels overwhelmed with a flood of misfortunes, all stemming from his separation from God. The psalmist references how *"deep calls to deep"* (Psalm 42:7), a cry for communion with God as the deep places of God and the deep places of humankind reach out to find one another. It is a cry for the Spirit of God to reach down and touch the psalmist's spirit. Such imagery is reminiscent of Jonah's cry to God: *"You hurled me into the depths, into the heart of the sea"* (Jonah 2:3). Both the psalmist and Jonah cry out to God, who controls the depths and the seas, acknowledging that it is *"your waves and your billows"* which wash over them (Psalm 42:7; cf. Jonah 2:3).

Whenever God's people are in trouble, they cry out to God. The Hebrew slaves cried out to God for deliverance (Exodus 2:23). The Israelites cried out to God for relief from their enemies (Judges 3:9). Elijah cried out to God on behalf of the widow's son (1 Kings 17:20). Judah cried out to God when attacked (2 Chronicles 14:11). The psalmist cried out to God in his distress (Psalm 34:6; 61:2). Jesus cried out to God from the cross, using the psalmist's words, *"Why have you forgotten me?"* (Psalm 42:9). When we find ourselves unable to hear God's voice or feel God's presence, we must reconnect with God who is the source of life, the Living Water for whom our soul thirsts. That connection begins with

a cry to God. Our cries become our first breath with God, our first step toward God. Scripture proves repeatedly that God hears those cries and is faithful.

The psalmist cries out to God, seeking refuge in God as his enemies persist in their attacks. The question *"Why?"* appears four times in these psalms (42:9a, 9b, 43:2a, 2b), and the psalmist wrestles with why God would let these things transpire. As these psalms progress, the emotional condition of the psalmist deteriorates. The psalmists' physical dislocation from God (42:1-2) becomes the belief that God has forgotten him (42:9) and cast him off (43:2). But even in this dark place, the psalmist knows that God is the only One who can save or redeem his situation. The psalmist knows that only the Living God may provide the *"living water"* (Jeremiah 2:13) that he needs.

In the repeated refrain, *"Why 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"* (42:5, 11; 43:5), the psalmist:

...takes refuge in his memory...For a brief moment the bitter present ceases to exist for him...his soul takes hold of his communion with God which now threatens to become obscure for him. He reaches the point, though at first only for a brief moment, at which a way is opened to him which will lead him beyond suffering and distress. (Weiser, 349)

The way that will lead the psalmist out of darkness into light is expressed in the words: *"Hope in God!"* The psalmist, from the depths of his despair, is still able to turn in hope to God for help; and where there is hope, there is life. The psalmist begs God to *"send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling"* (43:3).

Here we recognize our ongoing need for God's promised Messiah. For Christians, Jesus is the *"light of the world"* (John 8:12) and *"the way, the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6), and in him humanity's prayer for reunion with God is answered. In Jesus, Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled: *"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God"* (Ezek. 36:26-28).

Being with God is the psalmist's unwavering desire. The yearning of the psalmist's soul is to be in close communion with God, and neither the insults of his enemies nor the wretchedness his of the situation will shake the psalmist's confidence that God will find him and restore him. God's absence does not paralyze prayer, it prompts prayer (Goldingay, 35). When the psalmist does not feel the presence of God, it makes his prayers more urgent. Prayer and praise remain options for the psalmist because God sits enthroned over the floods (Psalm 29:10) and God's lordship can never be broken.

I've felt a little like the psalmist these past few weeks. There are so many people sick and hurting. People are dying. People have serious needs that I cannot completely satisfy. I work longer days, but never catch up; I work harder but get less done. I feel pulled in a million directions at once and can't seem to successfully balance work, and family, and school. And some days I want to yell at God: "Where are you? Do you see what I'm dealing with here? Are you listening to me anymore? Do you even care?" I know there are days and weeks when you feel that way, too.

There are days when the psalmist's predicament is our predicament. We thirst for a word from God, but all we hear is silence. We yearn to feel God's presence, but we feel alone. We desperately cry out for God to help us, but no help comes. It's in these moments that we need to hear and speak the words of the psalmist: "*Why 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*" (42:5, 11; 43:5). The psalmist is not naïve or overly optimistic when he says this. He knows, from experience, and truly believes that God is faithful. Why so cast down? Hope in God! Psalms 42-43 remind us that wherever we are, God can find us there, that God is greater than anything life throws at us, and that God will always hear and answer. Praise God!

Prayer: Loving God, I realize more and more how much I need You to be the Restorer of my soul. I need Your living water that refreshes my heart. Times are tough, God, and sometimes the pressures of life seem to encompass me on every side, but I praise Your name that You are near, and faithful, and You alone revive my weary soul. Keep me and those I love under that shadow of Your love in Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Sources:

- John Goldingay, *Songs from a Strange Land: Psalms 42-51*. Toronto, Canada: Clements Publishing, 1978.
- A. F. Kirkpatrick, editor, *The Book of Psalms*. Cambridge, England: University Press, 1903.
- Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1962.

## Psalms 42-43

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Psalms 42-43

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Athanasius (296-373 AD), one of the early church fathers, is famously quoted as saying, "Most of scripture speaks to us, while the Psalms speak *for us*" (Goldingay, 17). Psalm 42 and its companion, Psalm 43, are the lament of someone who is physically and spiritually separated from God. This pair of psalms expresses the heartache of someone who lost contact with God and cannot yet find his way back to God. The psalmist yearns to breathe in harmony with God and return to the intimacy he once experienced with God.

Psalm 42 opens with a metaphor that expresses the psalmist's yearning for God: "*As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?*" (42:1-2). This is a powerful image of thirst! A deer braying over watercourses gone dry. A body perishing without water. A soul expiring without God. Second only to breath is the body's need for water and the soul's need for the Living Water, which only God can provide. Artur Weiser writes of the psalmist:

...his soul, which, thirsting for the Living God, stretches itself far out in prayer towards God, without whom it is bound to pine away, is like the hind which, in the blazing heat of the summer, stretching its neck forward as far as it possibly can, searches in vain for water in the dried-up bed of the brook to quench its burning thirst...For him, God is really a 'Living God', and what he longs for is only and solely that he may be permitted to appear before God's 'face' and, coming into close contact with him, may have the most intimate communion with him. (Weiser, 348)

The exact nature of the psalmist's distress and the reason for his alienation from God are unknown; but it is precisely this lack of context that makes these psalms applicable to the greater human condition. Clues within the verses suggest that psalmist may have once held high office or played some part in the Temple rituals, but that he is no longer physically near the Temple in Jerusalem. The psalmist recalls journeying to the Temple with other worshippers, leading them "*in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival*" (Psalm 42:4). Now, the psalmist is compelled to sojourn far from Jerusalem's Temple, and he feels this distance deeply both physically and spiritually: "*My tears have been my food day and night*" (Psalm 42:3).