Studies In Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Four

Thirsting for God

Focal Text
Psalms 42—43

Background
Psalms 42—43

Main Idea
A sense of God's presence is so essential to life that a sense of God's absence and distance is troubling.

Question to Explore
Do most people today long for God's presence?

Quick Read
We can be as honest in pain and trusting of God as the psalmist.

Commentary
A man stood at a busy street corner asking those who came by, “Who are you?” By the end of the day he had more than a hundred replies. Each answered by what the person did vocationally: “I’m a lawyer”; “I go to school”; “I’m a teacher”; “I’m a businessman.” Not a single person gave this answer: “I’m a child of God.” What would you have said? How would your class members have answered?

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was right: God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.¹ What we do vocationally will one day come to an end. Who we are in relation with our Creator lasts forever. As Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher (1623-1662), observed, There is a God-shaped emptiness in us all. We are made for fellowship with our Father, and no other purpose can fill that void.

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This week we will be led to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God than we may know now. We will learn to give our problems and pain to God, and to trust God’s future reward in our present suffering. Then these psalms will belong to us, and we will belong to God.

**Meet the psalmist**

It has been observed that a genius is a person who gives expression to what we all know but cannot find words to say. By this definition, the author of Psalms 42 and 43 was a spiritual genius of the highest rank. No poetry in all the world has given better voice to the yearnings of the human heart for intimacy with our Maker.

With these poems we begin our study of Book II of Psalms. A major difference between Books I and II is in their names for God. Book I primarily uses the name *Yahweh* (*YHWH* in the Hebrew), the personal name of the Lord (see Exodus 3:14). Our English Bibles generally translate *Yahweh* as “LORD” (as in the NIV). In Book II, the name used most often for the Lord is *Elohim*, translated “God” in the Scriptures. In addition, Book I primarily contains psalms written by David, as suggested by the superscriptions, while Book II (Psalms 42—72) also contains unattributed psalms and poems written by others.

Psalms 42 and 43 were probably one poem in their original rendition. They repeat the same refrain three times (in Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5):

Why are you so downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Also, these two psalms seem to have a single setting, vocabulary, style, and author. The superscription to Psalm 42 suggests that “the Sons of Korah” wrote these poems. Based on the understanding that the superscriptions indicate authorship, the “Sons of Korah” wrote all of Psalms 42—49, as well as Psalms 84—85 and 87—88.

This family, the “Sons of Korah,” was descended from Levi through his son Kohath, and they formed a choir that served in the temple. A musician named Heman was their leader during the time of David (see 1 Chronicles 6:33).

Psalms 42—43 were written as a “maskil.” A “maskil” was a particular musical style or arrangement (see the superscription to Psalm 42).

Too, these psalms are *laments*, expressions of honest pain and grief to God. They are not particularly specific about their background. Therefore, their cries can speak for all generations and hurting hearts. But we can discern some of the background behind them. The author “used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God”
(Ps. 42:4). So we know that he was a worship leader as well as a member of the Korahite choir. He was also a musician with the harp (43:4) before God.

But now he could lead such worship no longer. He was exiled from worship for some reason, so that he must “remember” the Holy Land (42:6) and pray for God to “plead my cause against an ungodly nation” and “rescue me from deceitful and wicked men” (43:1). He waited for God to “bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell” (43:3) so he could “go to the altar of God” (43:4) again.

Meanwhile, he sang to God “from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar” (42:6). Mount Hermon is a tall peak that delineated the northern boundary of Israel. “Mount Mizar” means little mountain, but it is otherwise unknown. It may be a specific place, such as a hill alongside Mount Hermon, or a peak atop the mountain itself. Either way, it seems that the psalmist was exiled to the north of Israel.

The next phrase gives further identity to the psalmist’s place of exile (42:7):

Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

The Jordan River north of the Sea of Galilee contains many such waterfalls as it cascades southward. In the same way, the psalmist felt himself overwhelmed by the spiritual “waves and breakers” that had “swept over” him. All descriptions seem to point to a place of imprisonment and exile north of the Holy Land, far from the Judean land and temple.

One likely culprit as the “ungodly nation” (43:1) responsible for the psalmist’s exile is the Aramean nation, located in Syria. In 2 Kings 12:17-18 we read,

About this time Hazael king of Aram went up and attacked Gath and captured it. Then he turned to attack Jerusalem. But Joash king of Judah took all the sacred objects dedicated by his fathers—Jehoshaphat, Jehoram and Ahaziah, the kings of Judah—and the gifts he himself had dedicated and all the gold found in the treasuries of the temple of the Lord and of the royal palace, and he sent them to Hazael king of Aram, who then withdrew from Jerusalem.

The sons of Korah had been assigned cities in the very area captured by Hazael (see Joshua 21:4-5). It may be that some of the sons of Korah had been taken captive back to Syria, where the psalmist was now exiled. Whether this is the specific setting of these psalms or not, we can know that the poet was somewhere he did not want to be, far from his homeland and his place of worship. His lonely and troubled soul now spoke for all who feel such pain today.
**Give your pain to God**

The first stanza of Psalm 42 (42:1-4) captures the poet’s sense of isolation and spiritual hunger. The poem begins,

As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God? (42:1-2).

The writer had seen deer during times of drought desperately seeking water to live. In the dry season in Israel, springs and streams are few and far between. The deer are especially cautious when drinking, because they know that predators often wait at places of water to hunt them. They are vulnerable as well, with their heads bowed to the water.

But now the drought was such that the deer had abandoned all caution and panted for any stream of water, anywhere it might be found. So it was for the psalmist. His soul was thirsty beyond words. He yearned to “go and meet with God” in worship. Exiled from his temple and its worship liturgy, he felt abandoned and alone.

His only “streams” had been his tears (42:3):

My tears have been my food day and night,  
while men say to me all day long,  
“Where is your God?”

The Arameans (or whoever was oppressing the psalmist) added their taunts to his misery. If his God was real, why had he allowed his worshiper such torment? “All day long” they derided his faith and hunger for God.

Meanwhile (42:4),

These things I remember as I pour out my soul:  
how I used to go with the multitude,  
leading the procession to the house of God  
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throne.

His memories both sustained and haunted him. In his abandoned state he could no longer worship with “the multitude” and was near despair in his pain.

These verses in Psalm 42 continue the psalmist’s lament (42:9-10):

I say to God my Rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?”  
Why must I go about mourning,  
oppressed by the enemy?  
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,  
“Where is your God?”

Now the psalmist was even more honest with the Lord, expressing the sense that he had been “forgotten” and abandoned by his God. His “bones” (his inner self) suffered “mortal” or death-threatening “agony” as his foes continued to taunt him. Too, it seemed that the One he had worshiped and served faithfully no longer knew or cared.

Such honesty is always the first step to spiritual healing. If we will not admit our pain, we cannot deal with its consequences. The first step in any twelve-step program is to admit the problem, whether it is alcoholism or something else. No therapist or counselor can help those clients who will not admit their need for help.

Is there a sense in which you feel isolated from God and God’s purpose today? Perhaps the problem is your sin, and the first step is honest confession and contrition. Perhaps, like the psalmist, you have been oppressed by others in their sin; now you are innocent of guilt but nonetheless suffering its consequences. Are you dealing with pain or fear that you feel God should have prevented or healed? Are you facing physical or financial setbacks that God has not remedied? stress in your marriage or family that God has not lifted? In what way do you feel far from God today?

If you will lead your class to be honest with God, you will give them a great gift. In a culture that judges success by appearance, we so seldom give expression to our real feelings and problems. A community built on honesty and acceptance is a rare treasure. If your class can be such a family, you will show God’s grace to a graceless world.

Remember that Psalms 42 and 43 are part of God’s inspired word. The kind of gut-wrenching honesty they express must be part of the Lord’s will for his people. To find help and hope, begin where the psalmist began: with an honest statement of your pain and struggle before the Lord.

**Trust your future to God**

After admitting his anger and frustration with God, the poet rejected such rejection of the Lord (43:5–6):

> Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
> Why so disturbed within me?  
> Put your hope in God,  
> for I will yet praise him,  
> my Savior and my God.

His soul was “downcast,” literally *looking down at the ground rather than up at the Lord.* Too, his soul was “disturbed” and anxious with God. But the writer knew that he would
“yet praise” God in the future. His salvation had not yet arrived, but he was sure it was coming.

So he could sing (42:8),

By day the Lord directs his love,
    at night his song is with me—
    a prayer to the God of my life.

He had no evidence of such deliverance, but he could nonetheless trust that God loved him in the day and knew him in the night. The Lord was still “the God of my life.” And so the poet repeated his refrain of 42:5. Again he claimed that he would “yet praise him” whom he trusted. He would yet find deliverance from his Lord.

Psalm 43 expresses such trust in even more specific ways. The poet prayed for God to “vindicate” him and “plead” his “cause,” to “rescue” him from his enemies (43:1). He asked for the “light” and “truth” of God to lead him back to “your holy mountain” (43:3), Mount Zion (Jerusalem). He asked to be returned to the “altar of God” at the temple, where he would continue his musical praise to the Lord (43:4).

So, once more he repeated his refrain (43:5). Once more he claimed that he would “yet praise him” whom he loved and worshiped. Once more he trusted the God of the future for the problems of the present.

The psalmist was dealing with what theologians call theodicy, a defense of God in the face of evil and suffering. The free-will approach (championed by Augustine) focuses on sin as the cause of suffering and leads us to admit our responsibility for our present problems. The soul-building model (advocated by Irenaeus) asks how God can use our suffering to grow us spiritually.

The psalmist did not focus on either of these, though. He knew that his exile was not his fault, and he was not seeking present spiritual growth from his present suffering. Rather, he expressed a third model, the eschatological theodicy. Eschatology has to do with the future. This approach seeks future good in present suffering. It agrees with Paul: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). It finds present help in future hope.

Imagine that you are out of work and living on the last of your savings, with no job prospects. Then word comes that a wealthy relative is about to die and is leaving you the bulk of his estate. Your present circumstances have not changed, but now you have hope. This is the eschatological theodicy, the promise that your present suffering will be rewarded and redeemed in the future.

How can this model help you and your class this week? Name your pain, giving it to your Father. Now ask how God might use it in the future for God’s glory and your good. Know that God will do so, that our Lord never wastes a hurt, that present obedience is
always more than repaid in future reward. Too, hang on just a little longer. Know that you will “yet praise him,” your Savior and your God. You have your Father’s word on it.

**Conclusion**

Where do these psalms find you this week? How can they help you express your honest pain to God? How will they help you trust God’s future redemption for your present burdens?

At the close of World War II, Allied soldiers found hundreds of starving children at one concentration camp. They quickly fed and clothed them, and they tried to help them sleep. But the children could not sleep. The children tossed and turned all through the night. This went on for weeks without resolve. Finally a child psychologist hit on a solution. She specified that each child was to be given a slice of bread to take to bed—not to eat, just to hold. The children’s knowledge that they would have food in the morning was enough to bring them peace.

Take these psalms to bed with you tonight, and you’ll sleep well. This is the invitation of God.

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1 *Confessions* I.1.