

Psalm 42

The Psalm of our Souls

March 2000- Revised June 2000

Sermon Text: Hear the Word of the LORD!

NKJ Psalm 42:1 To the Chief Musician. A Contemplation of the sons of Korah. As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

3 My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, "Where *is* your God?"

4 When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And *why* are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him *For* the help of His countenance.

6 O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar.

7 Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; All Your waves and billows have gone over me.

8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song *shall be* with me -- A prayer to the God of my life.

9 I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

10 *As* with a breaking of my bones, My enemies reproach me, While they say to me all day long, "Where *is* your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

What are the Psalms? What kind of book are they? What do they communicate to the people of God? Psalms are songs, but different kind of songs. Some of the Psalms praise God for his faithfulness and power, some sing of God's historical acts on behalf of the people of God, some give us hope and encouragement in the love God has for his people, and some lament over a certain tragedy or discomfort they are experiencing. The psalm of lament is what we are studying today. Laments are heart-felt cries to God while in pain or suffering, sometimes in the midst of the times when we feel God is absent; psalms of lament are the opposite of psalms of praise, thanksgiving or other joyous psalms.

The psalms have been called the mirror of our souls as people of God. They reflect our hearts rather than our minds. The psalms communicate to us through imagery, like poetry. The psalms are not narratives or stories, they are not straightforward teaching on doctrine that we might find in a

letter of Paul, but they communicate like poetry with heavy imagery, short phrases, and oftentimes much repetition. The psalms are ultimately the hymn-book for the people of God that we can use to sing when we are joyous or in mourning, songs that we can oftentimes pray at the different times of our lives.

Psalm 42 is a psalm of lament and although we do not know exactly the time period or historical background to the writer's pain, it would be an educated conclusion to say that it was probably penned during the exile of God's people. The exile of God's people away from the Temple in Jerusalem occurred a long time ago in 587 BC when the army of Babylon carried the Israelites away from their homeland of Israel and the Babylonian army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The temple you will remember was the place where God made his presence known among his people and it seems that the psalmists in psalm 42 seems to be a great distance away from his God. Thus, the reason for his lament!

Have you ever felt distant from God, distant from his loving kindness and care, unable to worship God in spirit and truth because of perhaps a disability? Have you ever lamented yourself asking: "Where is God?" If you are honest enough to admit it, we all have had these kind of laments at times in our lives. Thanks be to God that he gives us not only psalms of praise but also psalms of lament, like psalm 42 that express not joy but anguish and pain.

In this psalm of lament, the first thing the psalmist communicates through imagery to us is that as the thirsty deer comes to the flowing streams, so his soul thirsts after the living God.

*As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?*

The deer does not think cognitively with its mind, using sound reason as to why it needs water, it naturally seeks out water when it thirsts. In the same way, our souls who look to our faithful God. We thirst for the living God, who alone can quench our thirsts, the deep hungering and longing of our souls. Like the pain we feel in our stomachs when we are hungry for food, so often our souls can be hungry, even undernourished and our soul will seek to satisfy the longings. Sometimes our soul asks if there is any meaning in our lives, any hope in this life, any confidence to be had in a world that seems to not care. Have you ever experienced what has been called "the dark night of the soul" where there is great pain and the real absence of joy, where there the only comfort you have is your depression and your problems seem to surround you, preventing you from escape? When the only prayer you can seem to muster is: "Take me Lord, I am tired!" Perhaps you have asked: "Is there any purpose or hope in the midst of my suffering, in my darkness, in my depression?"

The God of the covenant, the God of faithfulness and Almighty Sovereignty quenches the longest desires and needs that we crave as humans made in his image. Because we are all made in the image of God, he is not only our source of life and being, but the nourishment and the “food” and “water” of our life and being. While material and physical food and water feed the body, nothing can fulfill the soul’s desperate longings...except our Great God and Creator? Oh, we try to substitute his provision with the provisions to which our flesh constantly seeks and reaches with arms extended in order to have “more!” As the Proverbs teach us, there are some things that cannot be satisfied...one is the flesh. Our flesh desires after that which can bring quick relief...but in the end this is death. This is no real satisfaction, only a plastic replica, not only a substitution but a true counterfeit. Although we constantly and sometimes with great determination search around this life “under the sun” for satisfaction...we end up with only desperation, disappointment, destitution, and ultimately death! Is there no hope? Is this life “under the sun” all that we have to satisfy the longings and cravings of our souls? NO! Nothing in this world can satisfy like the communication of love and truth from God.

The psalmist then asks at the end of verse 2 and in verse 3:

*When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me, "Where is your God?"*

This verse describes the deepest longings of our hearts and souls. As St. Augustine said: “My soul is dissatisfied or restless until I find my rest in you, O God.” The psalmist is suffering like many of us and he longs to eat more than the tears that are falling from his face. You can taste the tears of his pain as many of us have experienced in the past. Common men are no help in our pain, because it is God that our soul longs and searches after. The men do not understand why the psalmist desires God and asks the question: “Where is your God?” as if to tease and say if you have suffering, then why does not God do something to comfort you and to heal you of your pain. As the so-called friends of Job, they are looking toward the earth to find solutions to the pain Job is suffering. So here the Psalmist’s friends are not bringing any comfort by asking more penetrating questions that cannot be answered. The Psalmist however is ever looking toward heaven to find the help in his time of pain and need. So we should do this as well, rational and logical explanations for why we suffer and are in pain do not comfort nor heal us when we are in the midst of the darkness!

In verse 4, the psalmist reminisces about the Temple in Jerusalem (which is one reason why I think this is a psalm during Israel’s exile in Babylon):

When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me.

*For I used to go with the multitude;
I went with them to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.*

As the Psalmist laments, pouring out his heart in prayer to God, he finds comfort thinking about the Temple, the house of God...the place where God dwells and in spite of the pain, he desires to worship the God who deserves all of our praise. In spite of his pain, he desires to worship God because he knows that in true worship of God in spirit and truth, that his pains will be taken away when God comes to heal him and to take his attention off of himself and to center it upon the God of all comfort, mercy and healing. Here we see something that is difficult at times: pain, yet worship...because as the psalmist takes his attention off his pain and focuses on the gifts and grace of the LORD Almighty, his pains seem to decrease and his thanksgiving is full of thanksgiving of shouts and joy!

In verse 5, we see the verse that is repeated later in verse 11:

*Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance [lit. "the help of his face"].*

The question the psalmist asks himself is: "Why are you so downcast, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" His only answer, his only hope is found in the Living God who comforts and provides for all our needs. The only help for our downcast souls in this life under the sun, in our day to day lives filled with increasing anguish and problems that never seem to disappear. In this world of sin, pain, suffering, where do we go and find the comfort for our sin-sick souls? Where do we find peace? Where do we find the true confidence to stand in times of trouble when the winds rush against us, when the waves toss our lives to and fro?

The Psalmist answers: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." Again, he answers his question that the only hope he has in found in God his redeemer, savior and deliverer. To hope in God is to praise him; to praise him is to hope in God our help. He finds solace for his pain in God. When the psalmist turns in the thanksgiving to the Living God, the dark cloud of troubles seem to disperse and the sunlight shines from God's gracious face...the warm and gentle sunlight of a summer day. Like the times when we have chills in the wind and we find a place in the sunlight, suddenly those chills are turned to warmth and we again feel our strength return to us. So it is with those who hope in God and look to him in praise.

The psalmist then says even when his soul is downcast, he remembers God and all the work he has done for his people from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Look at verse 6:

*O my God, my soul is cast down within me;
Therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan,
And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar.*

It is not that he thinks of mere geographical territory, but these places were significant of the place where God's salvation was made known upon the earth. This memory of God's faithfulness in the past brings comfort in the ever-present threat of troubles, anguish and pain. Feelings of loneliness subside as the familiar territory of God's redemptive work is remembered by the psalmist. The psalmist is calling to mind the memories of God's past acts on behalf of his people to comfort him when God doesn't seem to be as present. Have you ever kept a journal, a scrapbook to remind you of past events? Have you ever kept a book of prayers that included the times when God had answered those prayers? If not, perhaps you ought to do so. It is so helpful when times of pain and trouble come, that we recall to mind vividly like a photograph the mighty works of God in the past. We must always hold on to our memories of God's faithfulness in the past to enlighten and comfort us in the present and for our future. Our faith at times can be like a thermometer, some days "hot" some days "cold" and we need our focus to be on something more consistent and stable like God and his mighty works on our behalf.

All the forces of nature seem to threaten the psalmist as he laments in v. 7, then notice how he speaks of the LORD's lovingkindness to him, as he says:

*Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts ["waterspouts" KJV; "waterfalls"];
all the waves and thy billows have gone over me.
The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime,
And in the night His song shall be with me –
A prayer to the God of my life.*

But even though the forces of nature threaten to take his life, he knows that by day the LORD commands his love which is never failing- - steadfast...a certainty amidst life's uncertainties. During the day the LORD loves his people, and this daily walk with God ends with songs at night that acknowledge that God is with him as a prayer to the God of his life. His whole life, even amidst pain and suffering, day and night is spent in the presence of God's loving goodness and grace. It is almost as if the psalmist describes the realities of life's pains and uncertainties, but even in those threatening times, the LORD is in control and in the midst of struggles. It is the LORD's *waterfalls*, the LORD's

waves and billows that have gone over him...the LORD covers and protects him with the forces of nature that would otherwise be his enemy.

Look at verses 9-10:

*I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"
As with a breaking of my bones, My enemies reproach me,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

He asks God his rock...his foundation, his shield and deliverer: "Why hast thou forgotten me?" This is another indication that the psalmist wrote during Israel's exile in Babylon because here he asks God *Why have you forgotten me*, and he speaks of the *oppression of the enemy*. How many times when we suffer, or are in pain, or go through tribulation, or anguish, when we lose a loved one, feel rejected by family or friends, do we ask this same question. How many times have we asked the LORD: "For what sin, for what wrong have you left me?" When we should understand that God our rock is our very foundation, our stability and he never leaves nor forsakes those whom he loves.

The psalmist is being oppressed by the enemy, he has a deadly wound in his body, his adversaries taunt him and they continually mock as before, asking: "Where is your God?" And this is the faith of the psalmist; the reality of his plight. How many times have we suffered, been afflicted and been taunted and wondered to ourselves "Where is our God?" We should know that our LORD God never leaves us, never fails us, he is always with us and is a shield and a strong tower for those who put their faith and trust in him. Although God has his mysterious, providential way of being silent, he is still the unchangeable rock who is never moved. He is working out his purposes on our behalf, for our salvation. And thus the reason the psalmist ends Psalm 42 with a repetition of an earlier praise:

*Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God;
For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.*

The psalmist gives us all hope as he prays this prayer of lament to God. We have been where he has been, because this book is the mirror of the soul. It magnifies the concerns of all the people of God from the depths of the soul and brings answers to the everyday problems and concerns we experience as we await our Savior to return. He asks his soul again why it is cast down and disquieted...again, hope in God! He says: "For I shall again praise him, my help and my God." As the psalmist thirsts for the quenching of his thirsty soul from God, the answers to his suffering and

pain, he finds his answer in hope in God...he says to God: "There is no reason for my soul to be downcast, for my hope and help is in God." He finds the answers to his soul's longings, to the questions that seem unanswered in life by looking to the God who comforts us all. Through this acknowledgement of God's grace and goodness, it leads his soul and our soul to praise, worship and thanksgiving.

But we must never leave the psalms without considering Christ, the Great Psalm-singer who lamented this same way in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was suffering the anguish of the Father's face of grace that was about to be turned away from him. Jesus himself said that "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death," and we can appreciate that this "exceeding sorrow" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the O.T. in this very Psalm. On behalf of his people, Christ became the great sufferer which Isaiah had prophesied about in Isaiah 53, and he asked: "Why so downcast, O my soul, put your trust in God...for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

As he prayed to the Father that his will would be done, he took upon himself the sins of his people and became a sacrifice for the sins of his people, in order to reconcile men to God. He who thirsted as the deer for the waters was given a cup of wrath to drink on behalf of his people. Jesus took the cup of wrath so that we might experience the showers of God's blessings upon us. He who God was pleased to raise from the dead in resurrection and seat at his right hand, now offers the eternal word of life, because He is the Water of Life and although we suffer, we can be confident that as Jesus said in John 7:37-39: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Then John comments that he said this about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

We know now that Jesus has indeed been glorified and he has poured out his Spirit on all flesh so that we might truly know and taste the goodness of God as we walk in the Spirit, knowing that even in the midst of pain and suffering, God is indeed the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3ff). Isaiah spoke of this hope in Is. 12:3- when he prophesied: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the nations, proclaim that his name is exalted." And in Is. 44:3: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring." You see people of God, the LORD is our refreshing, he is the Great Refresher of our souls in Christ Jesus and by his Spirit.

Not only this, but our great hope is as the Apostle Paul teaches us in 1 Cor. 6! Because the Spirit has been poured out on all those who believe in Jesus Christ, the Living Water and the One who quenches the longest desires and thirsts of our souls, we are now the Living Temples of God. This means for those who have trusted in Christ by faith alone will find that although they are commanded to gather with the brethren for public worship of Almighty God, the Living Temple of the Spirit of God is within them. There is no distant location that any kind of exile or suffering can separate us from because as Paul teaches us in Rom. 5: suffering produces perseverance and perseverance character, and character *produces* hope because the Holy Spirit has been poured out into our heart and we have true joy in the midst of all of lives circumstances. For the One God who has graciously provided a Suffering Servant for us in Christ, also allows us to partake in his sufferings and gives a first fruits of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ so that we may be sustained and now that our God lives!

Let us be encouraged today to “drink deep” of the waters of life: faith, hope and love because we are indwelled by the same and powerful Holy Spirit that the Father raised Christ from the dead and so that same mighty power works in all those who believer in Christ alone...the Water of Life...the One who quenches our parched lives which are often times like the dry and hard dirt of the desert! Our hard hearts he has overcome by his goodness to us in raising our dead and hard hearts from the dead and giving us new life in Christ. With St. Augustine we can agree, the only hope and the only real satisfaction that can lift us up when downcast and that can truly give us rest is the hope we have seated upward with Christ in the heavenlies and the rest we have because we rest in Christ until the Day he returns and we enter the New Heavens and the New Earth and their rest eternally in the presence of our gracious and merciful God and Father! Know this: there truly is “a river that makes glad the City of God” and we know for sure as Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled!”

CRB