

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
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Longing for the House of the Lord

Introduction: Why do you come to worship at the assembly of God's people? If you were compelled not to attend, would you miss it? What is it about worship together with others that is different from private prayer and singing? Psalm 42 leads us to reflect on these and other questions based on the experience of a priest¹ in exile.² Because he is cut off from the worship of God (not absolutely but still in a very meaningful sense), James Montgomery Boice describes the psalmist's condition as "spiritual depression."³ As we will see, however, the psalmist's problem is not merely personal and private.

I. Psalm 42:1-5 Longing to be in God's Presence

- A. Verse 1 famously compares the psalmist's desire for God to the basic appetite of a deer for water. Just as the deer craves water because he cannot survive without it, the psalmist cannot live without the presence of God. He needs God's grace to sustain him, or he cannot go on.
- B. Each line of verse 2 climbs a little higher to show the intensification of his longing. First, he thirsts for God, then the *living* God (likely in contrast to the dead idols that surround him in a foreign land), then he asks when he may meet with God *face-to-face*, as it were. The implication is that only this could truly satisfy him.⁴
- C. Verse 3 tells us that without the presence of God he craves, the psalmist has only had his tears to sustain him, day and night. His enemies exacerbate his grief by pointedly mocking him for God's apparent failure to deliver his people. If the God of Israel is so all-powerful, how has he let his chosen people be conquered and enslaved once again? They interpret God's apparent silence like Elijah interpreted Baal's inaction at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18:27.
- D. As he grieves, even to the point of pouring out his soul, he remembers the public worship of God in verse 4. We learn that he was involved in leading at least part of the grand procession into the Temple,⁵ likely with musical instruments.

¹ Neither the author's being a priest nor his situation are spelled out in the psalm, but can be inferred based on strong clues. The descendants of Korah, even after the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16, were Levites who were given several important roles in the worship at the Tabernacle, and later Solomon's Temple. 1 Chronicles 9:33 mentions that one of these roles was as singers, and 2 Chronicles 20:19 tells us they lead the people's worship as priests under King Jehoshaphat. This fits perfectly with the author of Psalm 42 telling us in verse 4 that he would lead the procession to the Temple ("house of God").

² There are several pieces of evidence which suggest this psalm is about the Babylonian Exile. First, he clearly longs to return to the Temple, but enemies are taunting him in verses 3 and 10 and are likely the ones preventing his return. Second, verse 6 describes him remembering the Lord from the northeastern border of Israel, near Mount Hermon, which would be on the road towards Babylon. Third, verse 7 describes the psalmist being overwhelmed by God's judgment as if he were drowning in Noah's Flood. The single most climactic instance of God's judgment in Israel's history as a nation was undoubtedly the exile of Judah and the destruction of the Temple. This is also the clearest context in which the psalmist could be sure many other devout Jews would understand and relate to his plight.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 367.

⁴ The psalmist's intense desire to appear before the Lord is reminiscent of the bride in Song of Songs 5:6-7.

⁵ The word translated "go" in the ESV here is not the typical word for simply going or walking somewhere. It is actually *avar*, which means to go *over* or transgress, so he almost certainly means more than simply walking with the crowd. In this context, it seems most

1. Note what he focuses on in this scene: First, being with a “throng” and a “multitude,” i.e., a large crowd, as opposed to worshipping alone. Second, the great joy of shouts and numerous “songs of praise,” as opposed to the singular “song” in verse 8. Third, that this was all a part of a grand “festival,” which generally implies large sacrifices and feasting in fellowship with other believers, in contrast to being surrounded by enemies and eating his tears for bread.
 2. Since God is invisible, we can only know his presence by signs and not by seeing him as he is. These things are what the psalmist took to be signs confirming God’s presence with his people. Now they have been stripped away from him and he still believes God is present in some sense, but not with the same clarity and joy that he remembers in the Temple.
- E. In verse 5, the psalmist turns to ask himself a rhetorical question and answer it with the promises of God.
1. Of course, he knows why his soul is cast down. He has been describing the reasons to us clearly enough and will add more detail later. The point of this question is to look at the problem from a higher perspective and address his overwhelming subjective pain with the objective truth of God’s Word.
 2. It is a good practice to use this kind of questioning rather than let your emotions dominate your thought life. It is often easy to fall into a pattern of simply reacting and bouncing off of your trials rather than lift your soul up to truths that transcend your experience. This is certainly not to say that your emotions are necessarily false or unimportant, but ask yourself why you feel the way that you do, try to get beneath the surface issues, and answer your needs with the truth of God’s promises for you in Jesus Christ. This is essentially what the psalmist does, through Old Testament types and shadows, both in Psalm 42 and 43.⁶

II. Psalm 42:6-11

- A. In verse 6 the psalmist gives us a poignant scene of remembering the Lord from the border of Israel, as if he were looking back on his home for the last time.
1. We should notice that in verse 6 he says he remembers the Lord *because* his soul is downcast. This way of thinking, supported also by many other places in the Psalms, should remind us that depression and discouragement cannot automatically be taken as signs of the absence of faith. It is precisely *because* of his faith that the psalmist is so distressed at his present circumstances. If he were not a believer, it would actually be easier for him to cut ties with his old life. Similarly, a believer today may rightly be deeply grieved by the chaos of the world and the immaturity of the churches, but do not let your soul sit and stew there without turning to remember the Lord and the sure hope he has promised you.
 2. These locations he mentions, as noted above, are on the northeastern border of Israel, and therefore it appears to describe his last view of the Holy Land on his way to Babylon.
- B. Verse 7 harkens back to the imagery of Noah’s Flood, as if the psalmist were drowning underneath God’s wrath.
1. This is now the third distinct reference to various forms of water in Psalm 42. The first was “flowing streams,” representing satisfying nourishment in verse 1. The second was the psalmist’s tears in verse 3, signifying his profound and continual

likely to refer to the moment when the crowd would proceed from outside the Temple and *cross over* the threshold; in other words, the moment when they officially enter the presence of the Lord of Israel. This same word is also the root of the word Hebrew and may evoke some association with the Exodus as well.

⁶ Psalm 43:3-5 calls on God to fulfill his promise to bring the faithful remnant back from the Exile and explicitly connects this to the very same question he asked in Psalm 42.

distress. This is definitely a motif, perhaps suggesting to us that the same power of God which graciously sustains also destroys in wrath.⁷

- C. Verses 8-11 mirror and expand upon earlier verses.
1. Verse 8 strongly affirms that the Lord is still sovereign and shows his steadfast love in the daily lives of the exiles.⁸ The psalmist knows God has not abandoned Israel, even though he does not get to experience that wonderful throng of God's people crossing into his House for a feast.
 2. The psalmist appropriately responds to the love of the Lord with song. Notice that it is not described as joyfully as the singing in his memory of the Temple worship (verse 4), suggesting it is not as easy for him to sing vigorously as he once did. But still he sings. And he has hope, waiting on the faithful Lord of Israel.
 3. He also calls the Lord, "the God of my life," affirming that his life belongs to the Lord and he has not been entirely cast aside.
- D. Verse 9 is the first time the psalmist questions God directly, after several previous rhetorical questions directed at his enemies or his own soul.
1. His question is piercing, and brings to mind Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Too many commentators try to dodge these difficult questions by saying they could only be truthfully asked by Christ on the Cross. This neglects the way that the Psalms give voice to the deepest and in some cases most disturbing thoughts and feelings of believers as they live in this fallen world.⁹ The psalmist is not saying God has truly and completely abandoned him, since that would directly contradict verse 8. But in his isolation he feels this fear very deeply, and it is better that he, and any of us who feel similarly, should express this fear in prayer and song rather than suppress or ignore it.
- E. Verse 10 intensifies the earlier mocking question of his enemies in verse 3. Now he calls it a "deadly wound in my bones," representing to us that it cuts extremely deep, and if God did not hold his life in his hand, as verse 8 says, the psalmist would surely buckle and despair under this assault.
- F. In verse 11 the psalmist reiterates his hope as he closes. Why does he hope specifically that he will "praise" God?
1. It could partly be because this would signify that everything is right in the world again, when he has many more reasons to praise God. The simplest answer, however, is that this is his role in worship as a priest and a servant of the God of Israel. It is his purpose, his reason for living. Most of all, it is the only thing fitting for a creature in the gracious presence of the Creator which he so desires to experience.

⁷ This should also highlight for us the need for great care when interpreting the Covenant of Moses. As you read through the first five books of the Bible, you will notice strong undercurrents of free grace (such as the Passover and the ultimate promises in Deuteronomy 30) but also blessings and curses depending on Israel's works or lack thereof (e.g., Leviticus 18:5, Deuteronomy 27-28). This is because parts of the Covenant of Moses picked up and fulfilled the promises to Abraham in Genesis, but there were also parts designed to teach the people about the reality of God's wrath against sin. Psalm 42, among others, makes it very difficult to view the Mosaic curse of the Exile as merely fatherly discipline (i.e., simply gracious) because the psalmist compares himself to one drowning beneath Noah's Flood. Individually, the psalmist was of course saved by grace through faith as all the elect are. But as a nation, Israel's Exile was a type of the final judgment against sin. Very few remained, and even those who did suffered greatly as a consequence of the sins of their people, such as Daniel and this psalmist.

⁸ The fact that the psalmist uses the Lord's name, YHWH, here for the first time, combined with the reference to his "steadfast love" implies that the Lord has not forgotten his unique covenant and relationship with Israel. Pagans did not use that name and could not experience God's steadfast, loving commitment to his covenant. Compare also with Jonah 2:7-8.

⁹ John Calvin remarked on Psalm 22:1, "He was greatly oppressed with sorrow, but notwithstanding this, he breaks forth into the language of assurance, *My God! My God!* Which he could not have done without vigorously resisting the contrary apprehension that God had forsaken him. There is not one of the godly who does not daily experience in himself the same thing. According to the judgment of the flesh, he thinks he is cast off and forsaken by God. while yet he apprehends by faith the grace of God, which is hidden from the eye of sense and reason; and thus it comes to pass that contrary afflictions are mingled and interwoven in the prayers of the faithful." - *Commentaries Vol IV*, 358.

2. Michael Horton has observed that the pattern in many places in Scripture is that the covenant Lord calls out, and his servant answers.¹⁰ This is true in many of the most important parts of biblical history, from Adam and Eve to Abraham, Moses at the Burning Bush, and even Jesus speaking to Peter in John 21:15-17. The Lord gives a command, or asks a question, and the servant submits or responds in praise.
3. In worship, the pattern is very similar. God speaks and his people respond.¹¹ Recall that the psalmist's response to God's steadfast love in verse 8 was a song.
4. You may not realize it, but our whole worship service here is actually composed of God speaking and our response. Certain elements, like the Call to Worship, the reading of the Law, the Assurance of Pardon, the Sermon, and the Benediction are either reading Scripture or very closely based on Scripture because in those elements God is speaking to us. The prayers and the songs are our response to God's Word, and generally we try to shape them around what else is going on at the time in the service so it will be a fitting response.
5. Since in the New Covenant all believers are priests, it is right and beautiful that our worship should feature significant congregational singing and prayer. When we are singing and praying together, no one's worship is more acceptable than another's on the basis of skill or office.

III. Fulfillment

- A. When Jesus says in John 2:19-21 that his body is a temple and it will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days, he is not just using a thought-provoking metaphor. He is saying that his coming is the fulfillment of the purpose and the promise of the Temple, namely that God would dwell with his people in joyful communion and fellowship. Jesus's death was like the Exile for this Temple, during which it was destroyed under God's wrath against the people's sins. But after the Resurrection, this Temple has been rebuilt never to fall again.
- B. If you trust in Jesus Christ as your only Savior, you are a member of this Temple and his body.¹² Since you have been invited to this blessed Temple worship every week, do not neglect it! Do not forget what it cost Christ to purchase your access to the Throne of Grace and consider it less valuable than extra sleep on Sunday morning, or a football game. This priest knew the value of access to God's presence, and we ought to learn from him how great is the privilege we have as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession," so that we may respond in worship, proclaiming "the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."¹³

¹⁰ For example, Isaiah 6:8

¹¹ In Nehemiah 8, for example, the Levites read the Law, explain it to the people, and command them not to mourn but to rejoice and feast as the right response on that holy day (verses 11-12).

¹² Consider Ephesians 2:19-22, among many other texts that speak of the Church in this way.

¹³ 1 Peter 2:9-10.