

August 31, 2025

GOD'S PRESENCE: PSALM 41:1-11

Introductory Activity (Adapted from "Object Lesson," ETB LG, 145)

Prior to the Lesson: Secure a picture of Death Valley National Park. (Alternatively, you can find a picture of the thermometer on display at the park's visitor center or a picture of the entrance sign.)

Display the picture and ask if anyone has visited Death Valley National Park. If anyone has, ask them to describe their visit.

Explain "that Death Valley, located in California's Mojave Desert, is the hottest, driest, and lowest National Park in the United States." (ETB LG, 145)

Transition: In places like Death Valley, water is a vital commodity. You will not make it very long in the desert without a source of water. If you attempt to do so, you will end up parched and desperate. Our psalm today begins with such a picture. The psalmist is parched and desperate, but he longs for something much more vital than water. He is desperate for the Lord.

We are going to study Psalm 42. Many scholars link Psalms 42 and 43 together. It is thought that the two psalms were once either sung together or combined to form one psalm. The superscription of Psalm 42 tells us that it is a "maskil." We have looked at one of these before. A "maskil" is a psalm that is meant to teach. Psalm 42 "teaches by telling the story of a man who is struggling with his emotions... God did not make us with thoughts only; he created us feelings and emotions. This song teaches our hearts and our heads." (Preaching, 14) Let's see what the psalm teaches us about spiritual longing or spiritual depression.

1. IN TIMES OF LONGING (PSALM 42:1-5)

Read or have someone read Psalm 42:1-5.

Explain: If you know the song "As the Deer," you know that it is a "sweet" sounding song. In that context, we might read verse 1 and picture a pastoral scene with a deer bending over a calm stream, drinking from the water. That is not the scene the psalmist is painting. Instead, the deer is *not* at the water. Indeed, he is far from it and is desperate for a drink. The scene is a desperate one, and the psalmist is desperate. He is parched and dehydrated, not for water but for a taste of the Lord. He states that he longs for the Lord.

Thoughtfully Consider: Before diving into the psalm, we should stop and consider the longings of our hearts. What do you long for? Really consider

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 1* (Preaching Vol 1)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 2* (Preaching Vol 2)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50* (Exalting 1-50)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101-150* (Exalting 101-150)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 119* (Exalting 119)
- *Two Horizons OT Commentary: Psalms* (Two Horizons)
- *New American Commentary: Psalms 73-150* (NAC)

Teacher's Note: Psalm 42 is ascribed to The Sons of Korah. The fact would make for a great lesson faithfulness, redemption, or choosing the Lord over your unfaithful family. However, the authorship of the psalm does not play into the lesson before us.

"He is about to drop from spiritual dehydration. The psalmist could not live without God any more than a man in the desert can live without a canteen." (Preaching, 16)

TEACHER'S NOTE: Throughout this lesson we will speak of "spiritual depression." We should note that this form of depression is different from clinical depression which should be treated by a professional.

that. What thing, person, or feeling are you longing for? Do you desire it more than you desire the Lord? Wanting something is not bad, but we should put whatever it is in the right priority. Jesus tells us to ask for God's will to be done. In Matthew 5:10, He tells us to pray for the coming of His Kingdom. (Read Matthew 5:10, see Notes Box.) In chapter 6, He addresses our desire for provision and anxiety related to it. In verse 33, He reminds us of right priorities. When those priorities are ordered correctly, provision will be given by the Father. (Read Matthew 6:33, see Notes Box)

Ask the group to look back at verse 2 and explain that the psalmist is longing for God. Ask the group to discover what the psalmist desires practically. **(Teacher's Note:** These types of questions are used to direct group members back to the text and discover things for themselves instead of the group leader talking the entire time.)—The psalmist desires the *presence* of God.

Explain: Verse 6 reveals that the psalmist is possibly far removed from the temple of the Lord. If the psalm was written by one of the worship leaders in the Temple, as the superscription implies, then he is a Levite. Generally, Levites would serve in the Temple on a rotating basis. We do not know the reason for the psalmist's absence from the temple. He might have been on "leave," or there might have been a more serious reason. Regardless, he desired the presence of the Lord that, during the Old Testament, was found in the Temple. Verse 3 reveals that there might have been more going on here than a regularly scheduled leave from temple duties. The verse tells us that he has lost his appetite and is weeping at the absence of the Lord's presence. The psalmist is experiencing a serious bout of spiritual depression. Moreover, those around him are mocking him and the Lord.

Discuss: In what types of situations might we experience feelings of the Lord's absence or spiritual depression? How do the "helpful" words of unbelievers during those times turn into mockery of our faith and our God?

Explain: Many things can cause us to feel an absence of God's presence. Mockery or the mild persecution experienced by those in the West is one. Health problems, financial problems, or relational problems could also lead us into spiritual depression. Another reason for spiritual depression is ongoing sin and the corrective discipline of the Lord. It does not appear that the psalmist was practicing ongoing sin or experiencing the discipline of the Lord. As we will see, it appears that the psalmist did not know why he was experiencing these feelings. As commentators point out, the psalmist was experiencing something common to the spiritually astute person. Moreover, some remind us that while the experience for the psalmist was painful, it reveals a great spiritual sensitivity on the part of the psalmist. "This thirst to feel God's presence is a sign of life. Dead men aren't thirsty. If you are thirsty for God, then you are spiritually alive. If you are struggling with spiritual depression and you long for God like this, you are actually in a good place." (Preaching, 17)

Matthew 5:10

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Matthew 6:33

³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.¹

"The Korahites were known as temple singers according to the superscriptions of Psalms 42; 44–49; 84; 85; 87, and 88. David put them in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord after the ark was brought to Jerusalem (1 Chr 6:31–33). They also acted as gatekeepers (1 Chr 9:19; 26:19, KJV Kore) and bakers of sacrificial cakes (1 Chr 9:31). They are mentioned as singers during the celebration of Jehoshaphat's victory over Ammon and Moab (2 Chr 20:19, KJV Korhites)." (Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Korahite, Korathite," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1294.)

Ask: In response to his feeling, what action does the psalmist reveal in verse 4? It is one word and comes at the beginning of the verse. (He remembers)

Explain: He **Remembers the Community of the Lord** (You might want to write this on the board because there will be two other things he remembers). He remembers leading others in worship. He remembers and misses the community of faith. This is a bittersweet memory because he remembers the joy and misses the fellowship. Again, we do not know the psalmist's specific situation, but let's apply his feelings to those who might be experiencing spiritual depression today. When we lose our connection to the vital, life-giving presence of the Lord. We sometimes withdraw from the very thing God gave us to help us maintain that connection—the church and His people. When we suffer from spiritual depression, we might neglect Sunday morning worship or small groups. Instead of getting dressed and attending worship, we will watch it on TV or our phones while on our couch in the darkness. During those dark times, like the psalmist, we might miss the joy of communal worship and fellowship. For some reason, the psalmist *cannot* go to a place of fellowship and worship. We, on the other hand, can.

During one of his spiritually depressive states, the great reformer and preacher Martin Luther had locked himself in this study. After three days of this, his wife Katherine “noticed that the hinges were on the outside of the door, so she took the door out of the doorframe. As the story goes, Luther said to her, ‘Why did you do that? I wasn’t hurting anybody.’” (Preaching, 13) I would not normally try to tell Martin Luther that he was wrong, but in this case, I think he might have been. When we isolate ourselves from the community of faith during our times of spiritual depression, we are harming ourselves, and we are depriving others of an opportunity to minister to us.

Discuss: How can you minister to others (metaphorically take the hinges off the door) during their times of spiritual depression? (Allow time for answers.)

Summarize Transition: We can minister to others suffering from spiritual depression by practicing hospitality. We can pray for them or let them know we miss them. We can engage with them and their families for fellowship. What, though, do we do when we ourselves are suffering from spiritual depression? In verse 5, the psalmist speaks to himself about the problem. Verse 5 is a refrain that appears again in verse 11 and in 43:5. We will hold off on discussing what he says to himself until the end of the lesson. But we should stop here and note that the psalmist is not passive. He is taking action to deal with this situation. He began by **Remembering the Lord's Community**. Let's see what else he remembers before looking at the refrain he repeats.

Notes:

“The psalmist had lost something dear to him: community.” (ETBC, 133)

“The Hebrew term for walked mean to cross over or pass through.” (ETBC, 134)

“In a sense, there is a ‘crossing over’ in worship from our normal, day-to-day existence to a place and time of worship. The psalmist longed for the experience of communal worship that was central to the people of God worshiping in the house of God.” (ETBC, 134)

“Apparently, the psalmist has been unable to worship and has been separated from the assembly (42:4,9; 43:2-4). There has been a lack of corporate worship, a lack of fellowship, a lack of joyful singing (43:4). Those seasons of spiritual isolation, without corporate worship, most often lead to spiritual dryness.” (Exalting, 306)

2. IN OTHER WHELMING TIMES (PSALM 42:6-8)

Read (or have someone read) Psalm 5:7-10

Explain: Verse 6 begins with a recitation of the psalmist's depressive problem. He goes on to reveal that he remembers the Lord, but verse 8 shows us that he remembers something specific about the Lord. He **Remembers the Lord's Love**. There is a very important word in verse 6 that reveals something about the psalmist's act of remembrance. He says, "I am deeply depressed; *therefore* I remember you." (Emphasis added) "He chooses to remember God precisely because his soul is cast down." (Preaching, 19) This is another example of his active resistance against the feelings he is having. When we are struggling, sometimes the only thoughts we have are negative ones. We only remember bad things, or we focus on the negative aspects of our life or situation. The psalmist, though, reveals his active remembrance of the Lord. He is choosing to remember the Lord.

Discuss: What are some things that we should remember about the Lord and his activity in our lives? What are some practical ways that we can cause ourselves to remember those things?

Explain: We can make a list of two things. (1) We can list all the things God has promised us. Search the Scriptures and discover the great promises of God. They are myriad and apply to all areas of our lives and eternity. (2) We can make a list of all the things God has done in us and for us. We might start with the fact that He created us, as we saw last week. We might remember that He has saved us, is saving us, and will save us. When we have these lists, we need to find ways to remind ourselves of the Truths on them. This is important during our spiritual depressive times. Make Post-it notes of the items on your lists. "Hide" notes from yourself in areas around your house or in your Bible. Simply find ways to rediscover and remind yourself of what God has promised and done. This will help you remember the Lord's love because it is important to remember, regardless of our location.

Explore: Ask the group to look back at verse 6 and call out the places from which the psalmist says he remembers the Lord. ("I remember you from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar")

Explain: Commentator view this list from two different perspectives, and their views are not contrary. First, it appears that the psalmist is geographically removed from the Temple in Jerusalem. Mount Hermon is a peak in the far north of Israel. It is snow-capped, and the snow provides runoff that supplies the Jordan River with water. Mount Mizar might be a part of the mountain range connected with Mount Hermon. The Jordan River is on the eastern edge of Israel. And flows to the lowest point in the land, the Dead Sea. It might be that this geographical description

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describes the locale of the psalmist—He is far from Jerusalem. His description might also be metaphorical, describing his decision to praise the Lord regardless of his location. “Remember who God is, whether you are standing below sea level in the valley of the Jordan or standing at 9,000 feet on Mount Hermon just forty miles away.” (Preaching, 18) The psalmist makes a choice to remember the Lord’s love wherever he might be. He also chooses to remember the Lord’s love in whatever circumstances he might be facing.

Reread verse 7 (See notes Box)

Explain: The picture painted by the psalmist is dire. Water is great when you are thirsty, but the water here is dangerous. The psalmist is drowning in his grief and anxiety. In spite, his situation, though, he remembers the Lord.

Summarize and Transition: The psalmist makes of point of remembering the Lord’s love *because* of his situation. It is an intentional act to avoid passivity. The love he remembers is God’s faithful love—his *chessed* love. This is the covenant love of God. We, too, can remember God’s covenant love. The covenant love he demonstrates to us is so much more remarkable than the one experienced by the psalmist. The covenant that God made with us is based on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Like the psalmist, when we remember this great love of God, we can break out in song and prayer. Remembering is important and restorative. The psalmist **Remembers the Community of the Lord**, and he **Remembers the Lord’s Love**, but he does not stop there. Let’s see what else he remembers.

3. IN SEASONS OF WAITING (PSALM 42:9-11)

Read or have someone read Psalm 42:9-11

Explain: In verse 9, the psalmist asks God, “What’s going on? Where are you?” Before he gets to the question, he again reveals the Truth that he knows.

Ask: What does the psalmist call the Lord in verse 9?

Explain: The psalmist calls God his rock. God seems absent, but he knows that God is his rock. “The psalmist feels as if God has forgotten him (42:9). He knows not true (42:8), but he feels as if it’s true.” (Exalting, 307) Here, he reveals the third thing he remembers in the midst of his spiritual depression. He **Remembers the Lord’s Faithfulness**. His adversaries have not given up. While he is struggling spiritually, they are continually taunting him. Nevertheless, the Lord is strong to defend and faithful to act.

This brings us back to the refrain of the psalmist.

Reread verse 11 (see Notes Box)

In his refrain, the psalmist reveals that he does not really understand why he is feeling the way he feels. He is talking to himself. His self is asking his

Notes:

Psalm 42:7

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

The various words for waves “all refer to the psalmist being overcome by what he was experiencing.” (ETBC, 136)

Verse 8 “is a profession of faith by the psalmist.” (ETBC, 136)

“Literally the Hebrew reads, ‘Yahweh will command his lovingkindness.’” (ETBC, 136)

Psalm 42:11

Why, my soul, are you so dejected?

self why he feels dejected. Dejected means “to sink down.” (ETBC, 137). We might ask ourselves, “Why am I down in the dumps?” Then he asks himself why he is in such turmoil. “Turmoil means to groan (Ps. 55:7) to roar (43:6), be boisterous like a brawler who picks a fight, or even can refer to the snarling of a dog (59:6, 14)... In this context, it describes how the psalmist’s soul was in anguish; he was at war with himself.” (ETBC, 138)

Silent Consideration: Ask the group to silently consider times in their life (maybe even during the current season of life) when they have experienced feelings or feelings of God’s absence they did not understand. (Allow group members to share if they desire.)

Explain: Surely the psalmist has been away from the temple in the past. Most assuredly, he has had people speak ill of him or mock him. It appears that in the past, he was able to deal with those situations. He doesn’t understand why it is so hard this time. But regardless, he makes a decision to trust the Lord. At the end of the verse, he begins preaching to himself (cf. Exalting, 307). In his book *Spiritual Depression*, Martin Lloyd-Jones writes, “We allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self.” (*Spiritual Depression*, 21 in Exalting, 308) The psalmist refuses to follow this pattern. He makes an intentional decision to remember and speak truth to himself.

Summarize and Transition: The conclusion of the Psalm reminds us that God is our rock. Regardless of who comes against us or how we feel, the Lord is faithful to act on our behalf. The psalmist doesn’t “feel it,” but he declares the Truth.

CONCLUDE

When we are suffering from spiritual depression like the psalmist or when we are feeling blue or discouraged spiritually, we should be intentional about speaking Truth to ourselves. Far too often, we focus on the negative or we dwell on dark thoughts. Instead, we should acknowledge the reality of our situation like the psalmist did about his enemies. We should acknowledge the reality of our feelings. But more importantly, we should preach Truth to ourselves. We should **Remember the Lord’s Community** and not neglect it. We should **Remember the Lord’s Love** and remind ourselves of it. We should **Remember the Lord’s Faithfulness** and lean on Him. V. Raymond Edman (President of Wheaton College in the 1950s) said, “Don’t doubt in the dark what you have seen in the light.” (Preaching, 18)

Challenge: Earlier, we discussed ways that we can minister to those who are struggling spiritually. Challenge the group to consider ways they might minister to two types of struggling people:

- Christians who are struggling emotionally or spiritually.
- Unbelievers who are struggling with life’s challenges because they do not know the Lord.