

# THIRSTING FOR GOD

PSALM 42

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## INTRODUCTION:

Psalm 42 is the first psalm of Book 2 of the Psalter. It was apparently not written by David. It is attributed to “The Sons of Korah” (see also Psalms 43-49). The Sons of Korah were a specific family of Levitical worship leaders in the temple. Generation after generation, they were musicians and singers who led the people in songs of praise, lament, thanksgiving, and petition. Some people even think that one of these worship leader priests wrote this psalm. But we don’t know for sure. If you go on to read Psalm 43, you will notice a lot of similarities to Psalm 42, including a common refrain. For this and other reasons, many scholars think that they were actually one psalm at some point. Regardless, we will look only at Psalm 42 this morning, for there is more than enough material for us here.

Psalm 42 is a rollercoaster of a psalm. It moves back and forth and up and down from lament to hope, to lament to hope, to lament to hope. In this way, it sounds to me exactly like an honest description of the Christian life. Most of us are spiritually moody people. We are not always on the mountaintop, rejoicing and enjoying life, and feeling the ever-sweet presence of God through Christ. Often, once we get to that mountaintop, it’s not long before we get caught up in some life-avalanche that tosses us down, bangs us up, and knocks the spiritual wind out of us. But God, in His grace, doesn’t leave us there. He picks us up, cleans us up, and points us up to Christ again—He gives us hope.

This psalm shows us that spiritual despair—spiritual depression—is real, even common, for Christians. But it also teaches us what to do when we are spiritually depressed—when we feel like God is distant.

The psalmist seems to have been forced outside of Jerusalem. We don’t know why, but he was far away and unable to return. Verse 6 seems to indicate that he is now living near the headwaters of the Jordan River, in the hills of northern Israel near Mt. Hermon. There, his soul is despairing of his condition. Why? Because he has lost the experience of temple worship. He misses the intimacy with God and corporate worship he used to have. To make matters worse, he is surrounded by unbelievers, by enemies of God, who mock him. He longs to be worshiping in God’s presence with God’s people.

Psalm 42 is both an expression of longing and a determination of hope. It expresses the longing for God’s presence when He feels distant, but the determination of hope is based on His character, His promises, and His faithfulness.

**Main idea:** When God feels distant, fight your feelings and circumstances with truth. Preach truth to yourself and keep preaching to fight the fight of faith.

In this psalm, we see the fight of faith in the midst of spiritual depression:

- A. Thirsting but hoping for the presence of God (vv.1-5)
- B. Despairing but trusting in the nearness of God (vv.6-8)
- C. Questioning but believing in the faithfulness of God (vv.9-11)

## EXPOSITION:

### A. Thirsting but hoping for the presence of God (vv.1-5)

These first few verses of the psalm set the tone for the whole. Here we get to know the man who wrote this song that is so personal and yet applicable to all of us.

#### 1. His spiritual problem (vv.1-4)

The psalmist, whoever he is, is a poet, a theologian, and a man in despair. All of these facets of his identity and situation come out in the first verses of this psalm.

**As a poet**, he paints a picture for us to describe his situation and his feelings. He goes to nature—to a scene, perhaps many of his original readers would have been familiar with. Perhaps, if he was in the hills of northern Israel when he wrote this song, he even saw this happen himself and immediately drew the comparison with his own feelings.

The picture is of a deer. When we think of deer, some of us think of Bambi, frolicking in the flowers with rabbits and skunks, having fun, and without a care in the world. But what the psalmist wants us to picture is a deer in a bad situation—a deer wandering through the hills of Israel in Arizona-type heat in desperate search of water. The deer is panting to cool itself, but if it doesn't find water soon, it will die. Water is life.

Now, with that picture in mind, the psalmist says—that's me. That's how I feel right now. My soul—my very life—pants for God. I thirst for You, O God. As is made clear in the rest of the psalm, he pants and thirsts for God because right now, God does not feel near. He is spiritually parched and knows it. So, he is desperately searching for God like a deer searching for water. He needs God's presence like a deer needs water. This is the psalmist as a poet.

**As a theologian**, he correctly recognizes where his thirst can be quenched. It is in God alone. Although he is dry, and even though it feels like God has forgotten him (v.9), he still knows that God is the only one he can turn to. And this God is not like the gods of the pagan peoples around him. Those gods are wooden idols—dead, without life or power. But his God is "**the living God**" (v.2a)—the only God who is not only alive, but the source of all life. The living God is who he turns to because only a living God can draw near and help and satisfy your deepest longings. This is the psalmist as a theologian, which he will show several more times in this psalm.

**As a man in despair**, he cries under the taunts of his enemies (v.3). They constantly and mockingly ask him, "Where is your God?" Why would they ask him that? Because it is obvious to them that he is in distress, and he feels isolated, that he's not doing well. They see it in his face. They hear it in his voice. So, they taunt, "Aren't you supposed to be a believer in this Yahweh? You say that this God of yours is all-powerful and loves His people, don't you? What's the problem, then? Why are you in such distress? Where is your God now?"

And even though we say that taunts like this don't matter, or that we just shouldn't pay any attention to them, it's not always that easy to do. Words hurt, and they burrow deep. And when we hear them over and over again, they begin to influence our own thinking, even if deep down we know they are wrong. And it seems that these kinds of words from his enemies have caused the psalmist himself to wonder the same thing?

Where are you, God? Why are you allowing me to go through this? Why am I so spiritually depressed?

And as a man in spiritual despair, he laments about the joy he used to have in worship but is now deprived of (v.4). Here he gets to the heart of his despair—he misses God’s presence in corporate worship.

We have to understand that, for the Jewish believer under the Old Covenant, the temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious life. The temple was where God’s glory dwelled most intensely on earth—in the center of His people. In the good years, this is where sacrifices were offered, where prayers were prayed, where Scripture was taught, and where praises to Yahweh were sung by the congregation of His people.

To the true believer, there was nowhere else they would rather be.

- **Psalm 122:1**—I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

The temple was where you experienced the presence of God and worshiped him corporately with His redeemed people. The psalmist was now deprived of that, and it caused him to despair.

**Application:** It is hard to think of a more appropriate text for where we are right now. For months now, we have been unable to meet corporately in person because of this global pandemic. We have sought to be safe and wise, loving and understanding, and good citizens and neighbors. We thank God for the technology we have at this moment to still be fed God’s Word and to worship virtually. But it’s not the same. And many Christians have understandably struggled during this time. We were made to worship together, to see one another and hear one another sing praises to God, to encourage one another face to face. It is right to have a longing to come back together to worship Jesus Christ together. I would be worried if we didn’t have that longing.

But this psalm isn’t just applicable to us now that we have all been physically distanced from one another. There are times in our lives where we could be physically in church and surrounded by God’s people, and yet we still feel distant, and we long for the joy of His presence again.

This psalm is for you. This psalm is for the spiritually depressed—whatever the cause or specific situation. You are not alone; you are not defective; you are not a bad Christian because you sometimes feel this way. Authors of Scripture sometimes felt this way, not to mention some great pastors, theologians, and missionaries throughout history.

So, it’s obviously a common condition that God’s people deal with. The question is, how do we deal with it? What do we do when we are spiritually depressed like this?

2. His spiritual solution: Talk to yourself. (vv.5, 11)

This is the refrain of the psalm. Talk to yourself!

Too often, our spiritual depression either comes from or is fueled by, listening to ourselves too much. That is, we listen to our doubts and emotions that can come from our own inner weaknesses or the outward circumstances and outward voices of unbelievers that influence us. We let those things play around in our minds—“Because I am suffering, God doesn’t care about me. Because I

feel spiritually dry, God has forgotten about me. Because I still struggle with this sin, God despises me, and other Christians are ashamed of me.” That’s listening to ourselves, listening to our emotions, doubts, and fears, and letting Satan and others compound those things. Doing that will only drive us into deeper despair and depression.

But what does the psalmist do? Instead of listening to himself, he talks to himself.

- <sup>5</sup> Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.

He talks to his soul and questions its despair. Why so troubled, soul? He speaks truth to Himself, “Hope in God.” We talked about biblical hope last week in Bible Study, and Craig talked about it again on Wednesday. It is not wishful thinking. It is future faith. Being confident that God will keep His promises. When he tells his soul to hope in God, he is saying to himself, “Place your full confidence in God.”

He is grounding himself. His thoughts are threatening to run away with him, and so he grabs on to solid truth—I can, and I will trust in God. No matter what you are thinking, no matter what you are feeling—this truth, I know: God is faithful. God does not abandon His children. He is a very present help in trouble (*Ps.46:1*). In fact, His presence is our help!

Because he knows the character of God, he regains his confidence: “*for I shall again praise Him*” (*v.5b*).

- **Spurgeon**—“If every evil be let loose from Pandora’s box, yet is there hope at the bottom. This is the grace that swims, though the waves roar and be troubled. God is unchangeable, and therefore his grace is the ground for unshaken hope. If everything be dark, yet the day will come, and meanwhile hope carries stars in her eyes; her lamps are not dependent upon oil from without, her light is fed by secret visitations of God, which sustain the spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

We need to listen to ourselves less and talk truth to ourselves more. We need to preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. When we are dry, God feels distant, or we are spiritually depressed, and our mind is unsure, we need the solid ground of God’s Truth.

We need to remind ourselves of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. He gave His life to secure us in our life, death, and eternity. Therefore, our outward circumstances cannot threaten our security; and we cannot let our inner feelings overwhelm our confidence in Him.

Don’t wait until you feel like it. Preach the Gospel to yourself now, and keep doing it, and let the Holy Spirit work in you. Remember what He has already done for you. Sometimes the clouds of despair and depression can block our memories, and His acts of past salvation and grace fade into the background. Preaching truth to yourself will bring those memories and promises of salvation and grace back to the foreground and ground you in what is real—in Him who is real and a very present help in trouble.

Of course, we may do all of this as we should, but God doesn’t always immediately answer the way we want Him to. So, the psalmist continues in his despair, but he does not succumb to it. His faith remains intact.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*

## B. Despairing but trusting in the nearness of God (vv.6-8)

Again, the psalmist becomes the man in despair. He cries out to the Lord, "O my God, my soul is in despair [lit. sunk down] within me" (v.6a). And again, as a poet, he describes his despair with imagery from the natural world around him (v.7).

- <sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.

In verse 1, he was dying of thirst and could not find any water. Now, he's drowning under the waves of despair, taunts from enemies, and all the emotions he's dealing with.

But in the midst of the raging waters, he grabs onto a rock (v.9)—God, Himself (v.8).

- <sup>8</sup> The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life.

Again, the faith of the psalmist stays intact as he remembers who God is. Yes, the psalmist was physically far removed from all of those things he enjoyed so much before—the rituals, sacrifices, corporate prayers, and congregational singing that happened at the temple in Jerusalem. But, was God limited to the temple, or to Jerusalem, even under the Old Covenant?

- **1 Kings 8:27**—But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! (see also Ps.139:7-12)

The psalmist realizes that he can worship God anywhere! He can enjoy the Lord's (Yahweh's) lovingkindness here, removed from God's house, and separated from God's people. Day and night, wherever he is, so God is there, too. God is always with him; He does not leave him. So that, even at night, in bed, when he is at his most vulnerable and when despair would usually grow worse, He communes with God (v.8b). In the midst of despair and depression, he sings a new song—he sings a prayer to the "God of my life."

**Application:** And I have found that to be true even during this pandemic that has caused us to be separated from one another in the house of God. True, we are blessed to have live video of preaching, and Zoom and conference calls for groups so that we can maintain quite a bit of a semblance of Christian body life. But still, it has been easy for some sort of spiritual depression to set in a lot of us.

Yet, God has also been immensely gracious. And when I remind myself of the truth of His Word, when I remember His love and compassion toward me on countless occasions, when I think of His lovingkindness, and the hope of the Gospel, I have found true communion with Him. God is near to all who call upon Him in truth. Wherever you are, physically or spiritually, you can call on Him, draw near to Him, and He will draw near to you.

The psalmist does all of this. He gets himself on firm footing—but again, that doesn't mean all his troubles just go away. And as he has throughout this psalm, we see a man in emotional and spiritual despair, yet strong in faith.

### C. Questioning but believing in the faithfulness of God (vv.9-11)

He affirms that God **is** (not was) his rock (v.9a)—so he knows that God has not forgotten him and will not forget him (theologian). Yet, at the same time, it *feels* like God has forgotten him (man in despair) (vv.9b-10). His outward circumstances have not changed, and his enemies continue to taunt him and his God.

So, he questions God. He sounds a lot like Job here. He wants to know why God has allowed this to happen or even brought these things about. These are natural questions that would come to most of us, I think, and many of us have asked these kinds of questions when we are going through difficult or sorrowful times. “Why? Why me? Why us? How long? Have you forgotten us, God?”

But again, he doesn’t let himself go too far. He speaks truth to himself once again (v.11) so that he can still hope in God.

- <sup>11</sup>Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.

He tells himself, even commands himself, to hope in God. Even if his soul is so distraught right now that he doesn’t feel like praising God, he still commands himself to hope in God and anticipates the praise that will come. God is still his God, and He is the help of his countenance (lit. “the salvation of my face”). He knows that God is a God who helps—a God who saves—and therefore, God will restore the joy of his salvation. He will yet praise Him.

**Application:** It is ok to ask the questions. We all do. But even as we find ourselves asking these kinds of questions, we need to remember the answers that He has already given. And the questions that most plague us in times of depression—Does God really love me? Has He forgotten me? Will He let me go?—those questions have all been answered once and for all in the Gospel.

For God so loved the sinful world that He gave His Son. Out of love, the Son, Jesus Christ, came. He took on our flesh and suffered as we suffer. He knows what it’s like for his soul to be in distress—“*My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death*” (Matt.26:38). At the cross, He knew more deeply than any of us will ever know what it feels like to be abandoned by God—“*My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?*” (Matt.27:46).

But because He suffered in this way, because He was forsaken for us who believe, we can be assured that, no matter what our outward circumstances are or what kind of despair we are feeling inside, we will never be forsaken or forgotten by God.

Christ is our rock—our foundation. Cling to Him and the waves will not overwhelm you in the end.

Amen.

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