



Deserts, Waves, and Gospel Refrains

Psalm 42

Grace Church | 6.21.20

I'll start today, church with a bit of a personal confession. The last two weeks have been hard for me as a pastor. This is not a request for pity, this is simply trying to set the stage to show you why this psalm was so powerful for me this week. The hardship of coronavirus. The disunity of Christ's church. The realities of living in a fallen world.

We come to Psalm 42, and I think we find a similar expression. There is not a clear consensus as to the dating and authorship of this psalm. It is the beginning of the second book of the Psalter, wherein we see the continuation of many Psalms of David until the end of the book in Psalm 72. The theme of kingship is continued in many psalms throughout book 2, although we also see the reality of sin and suffering as well, and the weaknesses of the king. It's possible, perhaps, that this psalm, although labeled as a Psalm of the Sons of Korah, was penned by David. But I think that is less likely. It's called maskil, which from what we can gather is a technical and musical term. It's meant to be sung and performed by the Sons of Korah, who were part of the temple singers, but it does not necessarily mean that they wrote it. It's unclear whether this song was written before or after the exile of Israel and later Judah. Perhaps this is post-exilic, and written from the perspective of a temple singer who feels cast off and far away from the temple of God and therefore the promises of God. That is very likely, as the imagery in the psalms presents him as thinking fondly of both the temple and the land of Israel. Perhaps this psalm is written pre-exile. It calls to mind the example of king Hezekiah, well known for being a poet himself. Hezekiah's rule was fraught with emotional ups and downs. He stared down death as the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem, only to be miraculously delivered by the hand of God. Immediately after being saved, Hezekiah falls into a severe illness. After prayer, God promises to heal him, but immediately prophesies that Jerusalem will fall into the hands of Babylon not long after his death. The kind of emotional and spiritual ups and downs expressed in this poem echo Hezekiah's own story well.

But I don't think we are meant to know the author of this particular psalm. To do so would be to be tempted to classify the emotions and tone of this text with a particular set of circumstances. Instead, I believe this psalm conveys with crystal clarity the experience of every Christian at some point in their life. Every Christian has or will experience some form of emotion like we find in verse 1: a thirst for the living God.



And not just any thirst, a pant. This kind of thirst implies an emptiness, a dry mouth, something missing. Oftentimes the words “depression” and “Christian” are said to not be able to coexist in any way, but I don’t think that’s true. We are not meant for depression, for darkness of the soul. But we are susceptible to it. The cries of the Psalmist in this chapter are what the preacher Martyn Lloyd Jones has famously called “Spiritual Depression”. This kind of expression is all over Scripture. Moses, after being told he could not enter the promise land, asked the Lord to take his life. So did Elijah, after running in exile from Jezebel. Jeremiah, the prophet chosen by God to speak directly to his people, lived a life of downcast weeping. David expresses these depths in his psalms. John the Baptist doubted with a dark and anxious heart that Jesus was the Christ. The apostle Paul talks of the weight and depths of his darkness. Spiritual depression is simply the result of living in a fallen world.

The journey to spiritual depression can be sudden. Robert Smith Jr. call this the “path of descendance”. In life, we move quickly from Singing, to Sighing, to Silence. And the way back again is by a rehearsal of the the promises of God. It’s by talking to ourselves, instead of letting listening to ourselves talk. Today let’s consider two scenarios or two places from this psalm where we might find ourselves in spiritual depression, then consider the response provided in the psalm.

The Desert: When We Thirst For God (1-4)

Let’s consider the imagery in this psalm in **verse 1**. What does it mean to “pant”? Deer are incredibly flighty animals. Their entire existence often hinges on their ability to spot and outrun their predators. For a deer to drop it’s head to a flowing stream, it must be confident that it is entirely safe, no sounds or sights or smell of danger approaching. The flowing stream, the deer instinctively knows, may hide their scent and provide a safe place to drink.

Remember too the setting of this Psalm. The terrain of Israel is not primarily humid and deciduous, it’s dry and arid. The kind of deer the psalmist has in mind are those who are used to going long times without water, seeking and searching it out. Their longing and desire is for that safe and life-giving stream. Picture maybe a dog, panting for water after running around in the sun. Spiritual depression is often defined by dryness. Nothing gives you joy anymore, nothing sparks your desire for intimacy with God.

This is the feeling of the spiritually depressed Christian. **Verse 2** shows us it is not just any god, but the living God. No other stream can satisfy, no other god can bring life but this one. We love the image of Psalm 23, where the shepherd leads to green pastures and still waters. But so often, the rest of the pasture is not present? What then? What should our feeling be when we are in the spiritual desert? When we come to a place of spiritual barrenness, we must acknowledge our primary thirst is not for physical water, for healing or provision or relent of our circumstances. No, our primary thirst and desire must be for God himself. In the desert, we must pant for him.



“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”¹

I just can't help but wonder, do you know this feeling? If not, pray for it. You can't enjoy the rest of Psalm 23 without the restlessness of Psalm 42. As Spurgeon says, “The next best thing to living in the light of the Lord's love is to be unhappy until we have it.”² Everyone lives in the desert at times: what separates those in Christ from those who are far from him is what they pant for when they are in it. Would you rather have relief from your darkness than God himself?

Now we move to **verse 3**, and the realities of the desert become more clear. Without the flowing stream of God's presence, the only food we have is our flowing tears. I want you to recognize the significance of this. The psalmist does not hide emotion. True Christianity is not stoicism, it truly weeps in the spiritual darkness. We know that bottling up our own feelings does us no good, oftentimes it is the salt of our tears that stings, but which God uses to begin to heal the wounds.

When the Christian is in the spiritual desert, people notice. In fact, your deserts are often when people notice the most. They are looking for how you will respond. Your friends and family who do not know Christ, who have no hope beyond this life, they don't expect you to be without sorrow. They don't expect you to be dry. But don't be surprised when you feel the question: “Where is your God?” People who are hopeless, when they see the desert of the world, are crying out from the thirst of their own heart, but they don't know how. The only question they can ask you is: “If your God is so good, where is he now? Where is he in suffering?” And this is why our deserts are so important. They are evangelistic and apologetic. The deserts of the soul provide us the opportunity to answer the question: “where is God?”, the opportunity to provide an answer to the hope that lies in us. Think about it: when death comes to your family for instance, you rightfully weep. You feel the spiritual depression setting in. And all around you hear the questions. “Where is your God”? And although it is hard, although your hope feels dim and your soul dry, the panting soul in the desert has an answer in remembrance.

Notice the images of water in these verses. We pant for living *streams*, we *thirst* for God, we have *tears* for food. What we need is water, living water. So what comes out of the desert? A remembrance of the oasis of the people of God. **Verse 4** shows us this.

This is so central to our understanding of spiritual dryness. Where does the psalmist turn to pull his heart towards hope in the desert? Not his personal experience, not even personal study. He doesn't take a walk in nature, or long for some “me” time to recharge. No, the joy that he longs for, the joy that is the opposite of his spiritual desert, is very very simple: worshipping with the saints. Is this not incredible? What is his prayer in the desert? Where does his mind run to? His prayer is that he would be restored to singing and praising and feasting with those who know God in the house of God.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*

² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*



Friends, right now we have an opportunity in our moment to double down on the importance of the people of God. This year has been marked by weeks and weeks of absence from worship, of lack of gathering, of forgetting one another's faces. For 10 weeks we tried our best, but nothing in the universe can make up for the gathering of God's people in worship. No place provides more spiritual rest and is a better taste of heaven than worshipping with the family of God. No relationships better echo the streams of living water than life in community, confessing sin and pointing one another to the goodness of God in Christ. I wish I could preach this and you would hear it. One of the surest remedies to spiritual dryness is to throw yourself into a loving body of blood-bought brothers and sisters. It's not always easy to do so, it's not popular, it's not sexy, it may not fulfill all your preferences or comforts or needs, but it is the oasis in the desert of this world. If our city and our state and our country and our world simply saw transformed, missional, loving, humble, sincere, real, Biblical churches flourish and sprout up and be replanted and revitalized... the spiritual darkness so many feel would be pushed back. Not eliminated in this life, sure. We will always find ourselves in the desert. But here I say: this place, with the people you have covenanted with in Christ, is the sustaining food you need. As we point one another to our living water Jesus Christ, he wipes away our tears and feeds us with himself. And it all starts with the multitude keeping festival, week after week feasting on the good news of the gospel together.

Dear friends, do you long for the gathering of the saints? If you are dry, this is what you need. Now, the next few months or even longer could still feel different. We must continue to do our best to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and care for our neighbors and members who are vulnerable. We also acknowledge that for some in our congregation, gathering for worship with the body is always difficult and now even impossible, as they have illness or situations that prevent them. We mourn for those brothers and sisters, we hear their groaning, and we pant with them. If you are a student and you are gone for summers and breaks, go with God into the world! But ask yourself this question: do I long to be back with the body? I hope you do, and I hope it is in fact that longing and thirst for God and his people that carries you through any spiritual darkness and dryness when you are apart from us.

The desert will come. The tears will come, the thirst will come. The questions will come. When it does, remember your oasis is God alone, and long for the people of God in the house of God.

The Waves: When We Are Overwhelmed by Life (6-10)

Here is the second scenario we find ourselves in. Sometimes spiritual dryness leads to spiritual depression. Other times it's not the dryness but the depths that bring us to despair. Notice the setting at the end of the refrain in **verse 5**. Whether he is physically there or not, the psalmist has a particular place in mind. Near the banks of the Jordan river, he looks up to Mount Hermon and Mount Mizar. The river Jordan has its source on the slopes of Hermon, and the picture is of its rushes over the mountains and through the valleys into waterfalls and pools and waves and deeps.



Look at **verse 7**. The setting could not be more different than before. Previously, he felt as if he would have done anything for just a drop of water. Now, he is drowning in the power of the waterfall and the waves. What is the most impressive waterfall you have ever seen? For me, it is Multnomah falls outside of Portland. Thousands and thousands of tourists come every year just to get close. The *roar* of the waterfall, the closer you get, is deafening. It's power it what people come to see. Imagine yourself at the mercy of those falls: the world sinks around you, you see and hear and feel nothing else but the water. This is spiritual depression in the waves: complete blindness to anything but your pain.

What is it exactly that the Psalmist feels overwhelmed by? I think we find it in **verse 9-10**. It's the oppression of the enemy. Now, sometimes we come to psalms of lament, or to imprecatory psalms, and we wonder how they relate to us. Who are our enemies oppressing us? But Christian, don't forget, you do have an enemy. Satan is the prince of this world, and his aim is always and at all times to throw you into sin and rebellion against God. By whatever means necessary, he means to place you in spiritual depression. If he cannot do it by the spiritual apathy of the desert, he will do it by the spiritual anxiety of the waves.

So often, we look at our own lives, at the realities of sin in our hearts, and then we look out into the world and see nothing but hatred and division and lust and pride, and what do we feel? Overwhelmed. Or maybe it's not the weight of the world, but simply the weight of sin and sorrow. Something has broken you, the guilt of your pornography addiction, the burden of your struggling marriage, the difficulty of raising kids to love and obey God. I don't know what it is, but I know what it feels like to be drowning. To be unable to escape your pain and your heartache.

But go back with me to **verse 7-8**. The significant thing about the waves is that they differ from the desert in their intentionality. The desert is broad and vast, we wander in it, but it's power over us is in it's lack. It would be just fine if we had shade and water. But the waves, the waterfall, it's power over us is not what it lacks but rather what it has. There is intentionality in it, it's as if the waterfall is personally attacking us, pulling us in and down. This is what the psalmist means when he acknowledges the owner of the waves. Your waves, your waterfalls, your breakers. You see, even in the midst of feeling overwhelmed, the psalmist knows the truths of **verse 8**. The steadfast love of the Lord is somehow behind the waves, using them for his purposes and for our good.

He has a sovereign right to do with us as He pleases; and if we consider what we are, surely we shall confess we have no reason to complain; and to those who seek Him, His sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace. **All shall work together for good; everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds...**³

It's no wonder that Newton was a hymn writer too. By day, says the Psalmist, his steadfast and covenant love, his hesed, is with me, by night? His song. There are few more powerful weapons to

³ John Newton, *Works*



fight against spiritual darkness than a song. A song puts to our mouths words that might otherwise be difficult to say, and makes us say them out loud. When I am low, one of my favorites to sing is the simple hymn by Issac Watts: "When I Survey".

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

A song in the night like this lifts my head upward to survey the beauty of the cross. There I remember and call to mind that the Prince of Glory has suffered immeasurably more than I ever will. If I think I possess anything, it is loss. My pride is shot, and all I can do is look at him. As blood and tears flow from his face and hands and side, I see my sorrow and his love mingling together. The thorns that caused him pain and shame on my behalf could never be a more beautiful crown. And when I see such love and sorrow meet, he meets me in my sorrow through this song. Do you have a song like that? A scripture or a hymn or a truth to sing in the dark night of the soul?

Friends, the waves will come. You will feel overwhelmed and burdened by sin or sorrow or responsibility, and spiritual depression will come out of it. You will say to God: "Why have you forgotten me?" Yet there in the waves, God meets us. His love protects us, his song is with us. The waves are his waves and the waterfalls his waterfalls. His sovereign love is displayed most prominently when we cry out to him: "It's too much for us. We are overwhelmed. Help."

And this kind of habit: singing to ourselves, reminding ourselves, this is exactly the refrain that will keep us enduring during spiritual depression.

The Refrain: Preaching to Ourselves (5, 11)

What is incredible to me about the purpose of this psalm is that it is a song used by the Sons of Korah. Now, maybe you don't know anything about the sons of Korah, so let me share these two passages to give you some background.

Numbers 26:9-11; 2 Chronicles 20:19

The sons of Eliab: Nemuel, Dathan, and Abiram. These are the Dathan and Abiram, chosen from the congregation, who contended against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah, when they contended against the Lord and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed



them up together with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured 250 men, and they became a warning. But the sons of Korah did not die.

And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

The sons of Korah come from the lineage of a of rebellion against God. Their namesake was not only overcome by spiritual waves, but was literally swallowed up into the depths of the earth. And yet, his sons were spared, and they went on to lead out in praise for the very God who their forefather conspired against. From the depths of the earth and the depths of woe, praise can come out.

Here is the praise we see come out from the depths, from the desert and the waves. It's the same refrain in **verse 5 and 11**. The significance of this refrain should not be lost on us. We all at times feel the desert or the waves. What is the scriptural remedy provided for us? It's to preach to ourselves. Here is how Lloyd Jones puts it:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but there they are, talking to you. They bring back the problem of yesterday. Somebody's talking. Who's talking? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment in Psalm 42 was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you."⁴

And what is it that the psalmist speaks to himself? Hope in God, praise him again. **He is your salvation and your God.**

Friends, this weapon in your spiritual life is so undervalued and underused. Preach the gospel to yourself. Take a promise, a truth, and preach it to yourself forcefully. Tell your soul: "Soul, why are you so downcast? Hope in God!" When you wake up in the morning, speak to your soul. Speak promises of salvation, the saving work of God in Christ. And speak promises of union, that God is your God in Christ. Try it with these passages, try preaching the gospel to yourself.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. **Ephesians 2:4**

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of

⁴ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression*



debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.
Colossians 2:13-14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. **Galatians 3:13-14**

What a weapon we have, what a refrain! IN the midst of Spiritual depression, we can speak truth to ourselves. And this is not just any truth, this dual hope of salvation and intimacy is the central truth of the Scripture. The gospel news that is truly good news is that through the person and work of Jesus Christ, the triune God won. His victory saves us from sin and brings us to his very heart. We end then with the question that marks so much of our spiritual darkness, found in **verse 2**. “When shall I come and appear before God?” This is literally translated as “when shall I come before the face of God?” And friends, to that question, we have a sure answer. We come before the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is the image of the invisible God, the light of the world illuminating him. Remember in 2 Corinthians? We all with unveiled face, are beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This Jesus Christ is no stranger to your spiritual darkness. He went to the desert, dry and without water for days. On the cross, what were his cries? He said “I thirst”. In the garden, before marching up the hill to be our passover lamb, his tears were his food. Like we often do, the cry escaped his mouth: why have you forgotten me?”. All of naysayers mocked him then, saying “where is your God?” Can’t you save yourself? His enemies seemed to have won, he was buried and entombed, and the waves of death encircled him and surrounded him.

But Church, the spiritual darkness of sin could not contain him. You know its true. At the cross absorbed the full weight of the wrath of God, and threw it off when he rose from the grave. And so, when you come up against spiritual depression, remember that it will not be your end. The desert will one day give way to the oasis of God in Christ. The waves will throw you up against the rock that is Jesus. Remember that, preach it to yourself, and you will see your spiritual depression serve God’s purposes to make you his and bring his glory out to the world.

