

C. Psalms 42-43 – Sonship and Persevering Faith

Lamentation is central to Christian life and worship because of the *already-but-not-yet* nature of the believer's present sonship. As the apostle John noted, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and yet what we shall be hasn't yet appeared" (1 John 3:1-2). Christians are "of Christ," meaning that they share in His life and likeness by His indwelling Spirit. And yet their *christiformity* is never complete in this present life – first, because their bodies are mortal, bound over to corruption and death, but also because their inward renewal is a work in progress. Christians reflect Christ's fragrance and glory into the world, but imperfectly; they are *being* transformed into His likeness from glory unto glory by the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Lament gives voice to the suffering, angst and longing that characterize sonship in its present form, and such lament is *worship* because it acknowledges and reaches out to God according to the truth of who He is, who we are, and the destiny He has ordained for us. Thus *lamentation* and *faith* are inseparable in the lives of God's children in the present age: Neither exists without the other, they imply and inform one another, and neither can be rightly understood apart from the other. So it is that the psalms of lament characteristically ascend to a climax of faith, even as psalms that especially focus on the psalmist's faith have lament as their backdrop. For, in this life, faith trusts God for what is *lacking*; it holds tightly to Him with a view to all things becoming what they are destined to be.

Faith defines sonship, even as Jesus was the preeminent man of faith as God's beloved son. So faith is a predominant theme throughout the Psalter (even as it is inseparable from lament). Indeed, one could point to any of the psalms in considering the theme of faith, and yet there are some that have the subject of faith as their centerpiece. One such psalm is Psalm 42, which together with Psalm 43, forms one continuous poem. (Scholarship is largely agreed that these two psalms were originally one composition, but both the Masoretic Text and Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) have traditionally separated them, perhaps because Psalm 42 is ascribed to the sons of Korah, while Psalm 43 is anonymous.)

1. The centerpiece of both psalms is the thrice repeated refrain, "*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...*" (42:5, 11, 43:5).
 - a. Notably, the psalmist directed his plea toward *himself*, confronting himself with his own despondency and the fact that it resulted from an unwarranted and debilitating crisis of faith and hope. He didn't provide any detail regarding the underlying circumstance, but his poem indicates that his anguish was due to his separation from God and his longing to be restored to Him (vv. 1-2).

He likened this longing to the way a languishing deer longs for water in the parched wilderness: It doesn't simply look forward to its next drink; it *pants* with feverish thirst, able to think of nothing but its desperate need for water, and unsure when, or if, it will find a stream or other water source. This was the psalmist's anguished "thirst," but not for physical water, but the water of life that flows from the spring that is the living God Himself: "*My soul thirsts for God, the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?*" (v. 2).

- b. The psalmist found himself separated from God and desperately longing to be with Him again, and his song indicates that this separation was *physical*. That is, he could no longer come to Yahweh's sanctuary and worship Him there (ref. vv. 2, 4). It seems that the psalmist was away from Jerusalem and the temple against his will, but he may have penned this psalm shortly after the temple was destroyed (ref. v. 4). Many scholars associate this unwilling separation with David's exile from Jerusalem during Absalom's insurrection (2 Samuel 15). The idea is that this psalm was composed by David's Korahite singers, but to express *his* despair and longing during his exile from Jerusalem.
 - c. The exact circumstance is uncertain, but not the general situation. Whether speaking for himself or David, the psalmist agonized over his separation from God, and then having to endure the taunts of adversaries who sought to shatter his faith and hope by claiming that God had abandoned him (vv. 3, 9-10). Indeed, these taunts seem to have met with some success, for the writer himself confessed that he felt rejected and forgotten by God, so that even his own tears joined the refrain, "*Where is your God?*" (cf. vv. 3b, 9, 43:1). He was physically distant from God's presence, but he also felt the agonizing sting of *relational* distance. And so, at the very same time that he was confronting himself with the error of his despondency, he conceded that his soul was indeed despairing (vv. 5-6).
2. Thus the psalmist's deep struggle: outward opposition and derision on the one hand, and an inward crisis of doubt and despair that pressed him to the point of hopelessness. It was from this vantage point that he expressed his longing to again be in God's presence; he yearned to be able to worship Him at His sanctuary, but as being *reconciled* to Him, and therefore able to silence his tears and shut the mouths of those who reviled him.

And he was convinced that this restoration would come; though in his heart he felt abandoned and overwhelmed by the sense that God had turned His hand against him (v. 7), his mind reminded him that his heart was wrong; the Lord would yet command His lovingkindness toward him and bring him back into His light (v. 8). For Yahweh remained ever true and faithful to His covenant and His people, and so hadn't rejected or forsaken him, however things might appear. Thus the psalmist thrice exhorted himself to hold fast to his hope, with the confidence that he would yet find himself in the refuge of God's presence. And this confidence would enable him to withstand the outward and inner assaults that were pressing so hard against him.

3. Psalm 43, then, completes the poem by articulating the psalmist's prayer to God. Whereas Psalm 42 expresses the writer's confidence regarding God and His faithfulness, it doesn't have him petitioning Him in prayer. That falls to this second part of the poem. In fact, Psalm 43 is entirely a prayer, other than its closing repeat of the refrain that binds the two psalms together. In Psalm 42, the writer noted the scorn and reviling of his adversaries; here, he cried out to God to deliver him from them and their oppression. And whereas he previously identified these persons simply as enemies, he now identified them as an "*ungodly nation*" (vv. 1-2). (The noun rendered *nation* is characteristically used of Gentile peoples, which lends some support to those who argue that the psalmist penned this psalm after Babylon's conquest of Judah.)

Similarly, Psalm 43 gives voice in prayer to the hope that is a central theme in Psalm 42. There he expressed his confidence that he would be restored to God (relationally as well as geographically), but here, he externalized that hope through a *plea* to Yahweh to bring it about. He believed the Lord's lovingkindness would restore him to His presence, and now he pled with Him to dispatch His light and truth to guide him back (43:3-4).

The psalmist expressed this in terms of returning to Yahweh's "holy hill" as the site of His sanctuary (His "dwelling places"), but his desire was to return to Yahweh *Himself*, not a physical location as such. Most importantly, he recognized that God's *light and truth* would guide him back to Him. This imagery suggests two related meanings:

- 1) The first is that the writer was indeed speaking of his longing to return to Jerusalem and Yahweh's sanctuary (whether or not they still stood intact at that time), and he believed the divine light and truth would guide him there in the sense that those images connote God's goodness and integrity respecting His purposes and promises. Yahweh had pledged a day of restoration when He would regather His covenant people to Himself and cause them to be His son in truth, and the psalmist was simply affirming that this truth, upheld by God's goodness and faithfulness, would lead him back to His presence. When Israel's exile finally came to an end, so would his own.
- 2) But there is also a non-physical dimension to the writer's words. By pleading for God's light and truth to guide him back to His presence, the psalmist was tacitly acknowledging that his return to Yahweh wasn't really a matter of geographical relocation, but *restored relationship*, and that would involve repentance – i.e., reordered thinking and a right perspective. In this sense, the writer's plea for the Lord to send out His light and truth was a plea for fresh insight and understanding on his own part. *Regardless of whether he was allowed to return to Jerusalem, the psalmist would find the restoration he sought in a renewed sight of the truth and a revitalized commitment to it.*

And so, while it's doubtless true that the writer longed to return to the covenant land and Yahweh's dwelling on Mount Zion, he also understood that his relationship with Israel's God transcended temple worship. That relationship was grounded in knowledge of the truth and trust in the One who is truthful, and so he needed to answer his own despondency and desperate longing with faith and the settled hope it engenders. For any worship offered in the absence of faith is empty ritual; it is nothing more than unknowing interaction with a remote and untrusted deity. Conversely, where faith is present, there is no distance between God and the worshipper, wherever that person may reside, as Jacob and Joseph learned during their lifetimes. In the end, whatever separation existed between the psalmist and his God, it was the result of his flawed perception and lack of faith, not geographical distance. Yahweh hadn't gone anywhere; it was his heart and mind that had strayed away. And so the ultimate answer to the writer's sense of abandonment and despair wasn't physical relocation, but renewed faith and hope. Hence he ended his song with the same refrain of repentance and self-exhortation that had carried it along: "*Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.*"

4. These psalms can seem remote to the contemporary Christian and his life experiences, making it easy to brush past them and be detached from their pathos. But a closer look shows that the psalmist was experiencing no small crisis of faith – a crisis that, in its essence, confronts every one of God’s children at some point in their life. They may not share the writer’s particular circumstance, but all know the desperation of feeling distant from God and abandoned by Him to those who assault them and torment them with taunts of “where is your God?” At some point, every son of God wrestles with doubts and fears, and many have been in the place of despairing of all hope. But like the psalmist, they must grasp in the darkness what they know to be true and demand of themselves that they cling tightly to it in faith, and so revive their hope. As it was for him, so it is for all the children: Yahweh’s integrity and demonstrated faithfulness to His word and His purposes – which have now become yes and amen in Jesus – assure them that He has not forsaken or forgotten them. If they will but reach out for His light and truth, poured out for them by His Spirit, they will find all sense of distance and alienation evaporate, and once again they will be singing the praise of God and the Lamb in His presence.

This two-part song, then, makes an immense contribution to the Christian’s understanding and life with God. Among other things, it illuminates the nature, role and crucial importance of faith and hope, and it underscores the inseparable relation between them. In this way, it exposes the natural human counterfeits that have sadly found a place in much contemporary Christian teaching and practice.

- a. Faith and hope are two aspects of the same phenomenon in that faith gives present existence to what is hoped for and substantiates what cannot be seen (ref. Hebrews 11:1). Put simply, faith is the *conviction* (settled belief) of the truth as God has made it known, while hope is the sure *confidence* that that truth will come to pass as God has pledged. One cannot truly believe God without trusting that He will fulfill His word; conversely, such trust is grounded in informed faith.
- b. Faith and hope are inseparable and fundamental to a living relationship with the living God. But, understood in the scriptural sense, they are also *exclusively* the property of God’s people. That is, human beings in their natural existence know nothing of genuine faith and hope. This is because both have God and His truth as their premise and object. There are, of course, natural counterparts to faith and hope, but they are entirely personal and subjective and are bound to individual concerns and interests. They reflect what a given person desires and expects to occur or exist in the future, not what God has disclosed and pledged.

This sort of “faith” and “hope” are purely individual and radically human, having no necessary relation to any particular divine entity or any objective truth. To the extent that such an entity is implicated, it is only as the perceived instrument for obtaining that which the individual believes to be good and appropriate and hopes to secure. Scriptural faith and hope are antithetical to this; they are entirely objective and centered in the person, word and work of God. They have nothing to do with individual desires, goals, and expectations, but are the appropriate human response to objective truth as God has revealed and enacted it.