

Thirsting for God

Psalms 42-43

Studies in the Psalms #44

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WE all go through seasons of spiritual lows and spiritual highs. We feel this in ordinary seasons of life such as the end of the school year. Students and parents can be physically and mentally tired, which affects us spiritually. Often the summer brings renewal. Of course this is more so the case with our souls spiritually. Because of the temptations of sin and the trials of our faith we can feel thirsty and in need of drink to bring satisfaction.

I want us to return to the Psalms this morning to see what they say to us about this thirsting. We're going to take up Psalms 42-43 for simple fact that they share a familiar refrain and flow together. Here is a prayer of one who remembers the previous experience of God's grace and longs for its return. And this is depicted in the image of thirst. There are three images related to thirst here: being thirsty yet tasting only tears, being thirsty yet only feeling the waterfall of God's discipline, and being thirsty and being satisfied by the Lord himself. The Psalmists' thirst is for the Lord himself. Nothing else will satisfy.

Why He's Thirsting?

The first question to consider is *why he's thirsting?* In 42:6 he says **my soul is cast down within me**. One of the things that has been so fascinating to me in the past several months through the Psalms and Job is how often they've spoken of what our older writers called melancholy and what we call depression. One writer, Gijsbertus Voetius (try to say that three times fast!), described it as "fail[ing] to feel [your] heart's delight in God and divine things."¹ Of course this is not "normal" as we think of how God created the world to be, but because of our fallenness it is normal, sadly. And it can be a normal part of life even for us as believers. I hope this encourages you to open up to someone else about how you're feeling, knowing that so many others feel the same way. But why does the Psalmist say he is **cast down**?

The immediate reason is the people around him. 42:3 says, **my tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"** In contrast to his thirsting for God the only thing he has to drink are his own tears. One of the beauties of the Psalms is that they describe generic situations. Why are there no details? So that anyone and everyone can read them, pray them, and apply them. And the

¹ Voetius, *Spiritual Desertion*, 30.

enemies for us as New Testament believers can be the world, the flesh, or the devil. So there you are at work all alone during lunch and you feel those of the world are looking at you. You sense their words on the back of your neck. There you will be at the beach this summer looking at how happy everyone *seems* to be while your sinful flesh is making you feel that things aren't going the way you envisioned in life. There you are with some disappointment in your family life, which is a foothold for the devil to assault you that God has left you: **“Where is your God?”** And this hurts. 42:10 says, **as with a *deadly wound* in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”**

Note something else. Augustine pointed out some 1,600 years ago that this is not the longing prayer of just one believer, but of the body of Christ. This is a prayer of the people of God. So look at 43:1: **Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly (*lo-hasid*) people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!** In the context the people of God cry out **by day the LORD commands his steadfast love (*chesed*)** but we are assaulted by **ungodly** or unloving (*lo-hasid*) **people**. In our world of instant info it feel like Christians are more persecuted than ever; regardless if we really are, pray!

The ultimate reason is in what his enemies are saying: he feels abandoned by God in all this. Look at 42:9: **I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me?”** 43:2 says, **for you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me?** He’s saying, “Others mock me, but you’ve forgotten me!”

Where He’s Thirsting?

This first question of why we thirst spiritually because of the world, the flesh, and the devil but most of all because of God himself leads to a second for the Psalmist here: *where he’s thirsting?* Again he says in 42:6, **my soul is cast down within me**, but then notice how he is expressing this spiritual feeling with a literal location: **therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar**. This means nothing to us!

One of my favorite subjects in school was geography. And it still is fascinating to me whenever I go anywhere. If you have a map in your Bible or even if you can mentally imagine the Promised Land think of it this way.

Going south to north Jerusalem is about center; but then if you keep going north along the Jordan River eventually you come to the Sea of Galilee and above that a mountain range, which is the headwater of the Jordan. The point is that he’s far away from the Lord’s presence in Jerusalem. Isn’t it

interesting that as he's far away from Jerusalem he's remembering the Lord *himself*, not merely Jerusalem or the temple: **I remember you?** So not only is he spiritually distant but he's geographically distant. His enemies are present while he is absent from Jerusalem, but more important he feels God is absent from him. And it's while there at the headwaters of the Jordan that he sees a waterfall. I doubt it was as big and as powerful as Niagara Falls but the image is the same: power. This waterfall reminds him that what he's going through is the power of God over his life: **deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me** (42:7). He's thirsting for God himself, but all he tastes are his tears, and the only water the Lord is sending him in this waterfall are imagined to be damaging him.

So what does this mean for us? This is one of those difficulties of the Psalter for application. I'm not in the Promised Land. Plus, Jesus said now there is longer a mountain but that we worship God in Spirit and truth (John 4). This is the key. We can pray in thirst for God from any location because in this life while we are in the body we are absent from the Lord's heavenly presence. We have a citizenship in heaven, but are still living in exile here. This also helps us to identify with Jesus. The Psalms are the prayers and

feelings of Jesus Christ as he identified with us in his humiliation. He left the glory of Triune fellowship in heaven and came far down to us on earth. And while on earth he bore the weight of our sins and experienced the wrath of God his whole life. We saw this recently in our evening sermons through the Heidelberg Catechism. And Jesus longed for the glory he had with the Father. If the Son of God in human flesh thirsted for God, how much more so we?

For What He's Thirsting?

The Holy Spirit is saying to us that we can feel far from God, which is like thirsting but only tasting tears; we can feel far from God, which is like thirsting, but the only water available is a powerful waterfall crashing over us. We can thirst, but nothing else satisfies. This leads to *for what he's thirsting?* Go back to the beautiful opening image: **as a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (42:1-2), who is the God of my life (42:8). And he asks, when shall I come (because he is far away) and appear before God?** He's thirsting; he needs a drink; and he realizes that the only thing that satisfies is the Lord himself.

Do we realize this? Some of us, for example, are big thinkers so we contemplate the wonders of the sea, the wonders of the earth, the wonders

of the sky, and the wonders of the universe; but this contemplation itself cannot satisfy, only the one who made them all can. And this is true for all of us no matter our situation in life. You see, in our sinful blindness we often do not look to the Lord but to things apart from him for our spiritual joy and satisfaction. But the Psalm is saying to us in the midst of the end of the school year when we're physically tired and we're feeling it's effects on our souls that our Triune God himself is the only object we must look to for spiritual renewal, restoration, and revival as individuals and as a congregation. One of the proofs he offers of this is the past: **these things I remember, as I pour out my soul [now]: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival (42:4).** So he prays to the Lord for the Lord: **Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God (43:3-4).**

Isn't this what Jesus promised us in the story of the Samaritan women at the well of water in John 4? He asked her for a drink of water. This astonished her because how could a pure Jew ask an unclean half-breed for a

drink? So Jesus tells her that's if she knew who he was she would have asked him for a drink and he would have given her living water. She thought he went running water. But Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

Jesus is the object of this Psalm, brothers and sisters. Amen? And if you've come to him by faith you have the water of eternal life to satisfy your eternal thirst. What's your spiritual low today? What's our spiritual low as a congregation today? You see, even when we do not feel satisfied and still feel thirsty due to our tears or to the waterfalls of God's providence allowing us to feel far from him, looking to Jesus by faith is the key to continual renewal in our souls. Revival is nothing more than embracing Jesus afresh and trusting that the Holy Spirit will once again cause us to experience all his gifts and graces for a new season of life. This is why we can ask rhetorically in such faith that threefold refrain: **Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God** (42:5-6, 11; 43:5). Amen.