

## Why the Psalms?

In the words of my Hebrew professor from seminary: “Only a Philistine could fail to love the Psalms. Of all the books in the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms is the one most loved by the family of God. Within the Psalms we find expression to our deepest thoughts of reverence for God, our most excited joy in knowing Him, and our darkest terror in those moments we feel cut off from Him. In the Psalms we have it all: music, wisdom, beauty, truth, theology, experience, emotion and expression. In the Psalms, we have the Lord Jesus in bold prophecy and in subtle type. Most of all, in the Psalms, we have the praise of God.” Enjoy!

## Reflections on Psalms 42-43

### Read Psalms 42 and 43

Psalms 42 and 43 were likely one poem at one time that was divided into two sections for liturgical use in temple worship. They have the same theme, context and refrain, so we will look at them together as one psalm. This is a psalm of lament, which is a common type of psalm, in which the psalmist is suffering for some reason and makes his “complaint” known to God. In this type of psalm, God’s presence and deliverance seem very distant, and yet the psalmist always includes a confession of trust and a vow of praise to be offered when God brings deliverance.

We do not know the exact historical setting of this Psalm, written by one of sons of Korah, but apparently he was separated (possibly in exile) from the temple and the community worship of God, and was being taunted by enemies who did not believe in Yahweh. This is the major thrust of the psalm—the psalmist longs for time when he will again experience the unique presence and praise of God in the midst of the congregation at the temple. This psalm has a unique application for people who find themselves distanced from the worshipping community and who feel the loss intensely...people like us this morning!

*Let’s observe three major emphases from this psalm:*

### **1. The psalmist’s longing for God’s presence while remembering earlier times of joyful worship.**

In one of the more vivid images of the Bible, the psalmist describes his experience of being cut off from the worshipping community (*read 42:1 again*). The godly would feel this as grievously as a thirsting deer longing for water in a time of drought. How important temple worship was to the faithful Israelite! He is consumed with thoughts of worship of God that he experienced

at the temple in Jerusalem with throngs of joyful believers (*read 42:4 again*). His petition to God is not merely for an individual experience of God's presence, but to be delivered from his present situation of oppression from his enemies so that he could once again join the worshipping community at the temple (*read 43:4 again*). As is common in the Psalms, the psalmist desire to "praise" God is not describing acts of private devotion, but of public, vocal declaration of the goodness of God and His deliverance in the midst of the congregation.

## **2. The psalmist's present trust in God though he feels alienated from and abandoned by God.**

The psalmist experiences a real sense of despair; we might even say depression. He describes his condition as one of continual mourning, his tears are his food all day long, his bones are shattering. As he hears the river Jordan, not far from its source on the slopes of Hermon, as it rushes among boulders and over falls, he pictures his life as completely overwhelmed; wave after wave submerging him. Aside from his alienation from the worshipping community, his grief is compounded by the constant taunt of unbelieving enemies who ridicule his faith and ask "where is your God?" In his despair he asks why God has forgotten and rejected him! And yet, his complaint and petition is always directed to God, and never a denial of God. He remains a believer whose trust is in His God. It is precisely because God is the God of his strength (43:2) and his exceeding joy, that he questions why God has seemingly rejected him. In his self-doubt the psalmist remembers the covenant love of Yahweh. He sang and prayed to him morning and evening though he had not yet experienced deliverance (*read 42:8 again*).

## **3. The psalmist's exhortation to his inner being in a time of great despair.**

In the refrain, repeated three times (42:5, 11; 43:5), the psalmist interrogates himself about his present despair and exhorts himself to hope in God. He actually talks to himself! One day, he knows, by the grace of God he will return to the place of the praise of God, the center of worship in Jerusalem. This present experience of despair will only result in the greater praise of God amidst the congregation. This refrain may serve as a model for people in grief and despair in all ages. We must interrogate the source of our despair, fear and doubt, and must speak biblical words of hope to our soul. Doubt comes easily; hope is like a spiritual muscle that needs to be trained and disciplined. This is something we call for within ourselves, but also depend on God to finally deliver. As believers, we must take the "long view" on life and present distress. We can say to ourselves with utter certainty "we shall again praise Him" in His sanctuary amongst His people and forever. O church, "hope in God, for we shall again praise Him" together. I pray that it is very soon! Amen.

## Questions:

A. What is the spiritual condition of the Psalmist in Psalm 42 (and 43)? Why is he mourning?

B. What are the good memories that the Psalmist recalls in v.4? (Consider the desire expressed in 43:3-4 also.)

Why do you think temple worship was so precious to the Israelite?

What makes corporate worship so special that believers mourn when they can't gather with the rest of the body of Christ? What is unique about corporate worship?

C. The Psalmist interrogates himself in the refrain that is repeated in the first half of verses 42:5, 42:11, and 43:5. What is his strategy in asking this question?

Notice that in the second half of each of those verses, he speaks directly to himself. What is his exhortation to himself? What does he mean by "I shall again praise Him"?

What exhortations should Christians be speaking to themselves during a time like this?

What is the ultimate fulfillment of the psalmist's hope?