

Psalm 42 & 43  
Thirsting for God

Introduction

These Psalms are to be taken together. They form three equal parts, each ending with “Why are you cast down?”. Were they divided for the convenience of the choristers in the Temple? Or for devotional purposes? This division must have occurred early, for they always appear as two separate Psalms in the Hebrew manuscripts and versions in other languages.

These Psalms, like many others, speak powerfully to our condition. It is an experience that we know far too often. Speaks to the spiritually depressed, the discouraged, to whom God seems afar off, going through a spiritual desert, communion with God has broken down. This condition was known among various Bible characters, e.g. Elijah. He was so depressed He asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19:4).

In this condition we need to take selves in hand, and remind ourselves who and what God is like, what He has done and pledged to do. Ask Him to revive us. The Psalms also touch on the wider and more general theme – knowing God, longing for God and thirsting for God – one of the marks of spiritual health and the condition for spiritual growth.

The Psalmist knows God already, but his communion with God has been broken and he longs to get back with Him and know Him better than before. God breaks up the fallow ground to bring about renewal and deeper experience. Here he goes through the pains and struggles, which lead him to a new stage in his relationship with God.

God’s use of three things to speak to Him

- (a) Memories of the past. The Psalmist is probably in exile, and remembering the old days in Jerusalem. Familiar faces, great festivals with pilgrims, services, ritual, worship and joy. As he considers the good old days, the past comes flooding back. Looking back can be a sign of spiritual decay, but sometimes it stimulates a longing to return to a knowledge of God which was enjoyed in the past.

*“Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord.”*

The Bible often calls on us to remember past events, e.g. the resurrection (2 Timothy 2:8), and the words of Jesus (Acts 20:35). We all can remember memories of past blessings, and wish them to return. George Whitfield, when he returned to Oxford, always ran to the spot where he first met Christ, and kissed the ground.

- (b) Isolation in the present. Now living near Mount Hermon (Caesarea Philippi area), far from previous scenes of blessing, cut off from God’s people, and

even feeling cut off from God's presence. No helpful ministry, no fellowship. Such acute isolation is the lot of many missionaries (and others nearer home). Abroad all is strange. It is not easy to understand others and communicate with them. When they return home they find changes, and do not fit in any longer. Similar changes disorientate us – change of job, change of home, loss of a friend especially through death, retirement, children leaving home. Lessons have to be learned in isolation, which cannot be learned in fellowship. Loneliness causes us to look to the Lord, and gives a renewed desire for the Lord's presence. Perhaps we relied on others too much, and not on Him. Now we are shut up to Himself.

- (c) Hostile environment. Like a hunted deer searching for water, feeling pursued, taunted by foes. **Where is your God?** (Psalm 42:3). **Oppressed by the enemy** (Psalm 42:9). **Deceitful and wicked men** (Psalm 43:1). He feels cast off, whereas before he felt secure and self confident. Now he has to depend on God in a new way. On his own, he is no match for enemies and evil men. God brings him to the end of himself and his self-confidence, he realises how weak and vulnerable he is. Brokenness is often where deeper knowledge of God begins. A deep experience brings new rivers of blessing, which go on to flow through him to others. It has been the experience of some ministers who have hit rock bottom in despair, then found the rock of ages, and never been the same again, their ministry has had new quality thereafter.

#### Response of Psalmist to the situation

He is certainly in a bad way. **My tears have been my food day and night** (Psalm 42:3). **All your waves and breakers have swept over me** (Psalm 42:7). But his faith does not give up, and he is determined to get through to God. **Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God** (Psalm 42:5). He remembers his personal and covenant relationship with God. **The Lord directs His love.. His song is with me** (Psalm 42:8). He asks God for an answer (Psalm 42:9). **You are God my Rock.. Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God** (Psalm 42:9,11). **Send forth your light and your truth. Let them guide me, let them bring me to your holy mountain... I will go to the altar of God, to God, my hope and my delight. I will praise you with the harp** (Psalm 43:3,4).

We see his growing confidence that he will get through and overcome the problems in his life. He knows he will be delivered. The full answer has not yet come, yet he is confident, and with good reason. God places no spiritual longing within us that He is not able to meet. N.B. The Psalmist's confidence is not in his own resources; it is in God, His faithfulness, Saviour, God, love rock, stronghold, light, truth, delight and joy.

Adoniram Judson once said, "My future is as bright as the promises of God." Someone last century summed it up – "Our hope lies not in the man we put on the moon, but in the man we put on the cross." **He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not, along with Him, graciously give us all things?** (Romans 8:32). God does not intend to mock us and leave us with our spiritual longings and spiritual desires unanswered.

But we are not to look to ourselves, or to others, or seek a change in our circumstances. We need to go beyond all these, and fix on something outside of us. We do not have a fountain within, we were not made to be self-reliant and important. We must reach beyond to another all-sufficient source. Hudson Taylor said that he failed trying to work up faith in himself, and found the answer came by looking away to and resting on the Faithful One.

### Universal relevance of this Psalm

The Psalmist was in a special situation. He had lost a sense of God's presence because of his changed circumstances. He was longing to renew contact with God. But there is a sense here in which we can all make this psalm our own, and pray this prayer. It is one of the paradoxes in the Christian life, that as we are satisfied, the more we long for more.

*“We taste Thee, o Thou living bread,  
And long to feast upon Thee still.”*

Indeed if we do not have a constant hunger and thirst for Christ, there is something wrong. We must never be satisfied with attainments. Long for more grace and knowledge of the Lord. The Christian life involves coming again and again to the fountain if we want to get anywhere spiritually. **If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink** (John 7:37). Thirst can be painful, even more compelling and demanding than hunger. **From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another** (John 1:16). The Holy Spirit keeps creating desires after God.

So when we come to church, we should be satisfied with nothing less than God Himself. We do not just come for a good sing, to meet friends, to sit in the pew listening to a man speak. God should be all in all to us – light for our understanding, power for our wills, our authority for living, the motive for our actions, the home for our affections, love for our hearts and strength for our efforts. He is the one all-sufficient person who can meet the longings of heart, soul and life. In proportion as we thirst, so we receive.

At the heart of our spiritual life and experience is our relationship with God. Knowing Him, longing for Him, living on Him, thirsting for Him. Not just Bible knowledge and doctrine or service, but knowing God Himself – this is the heart of the Christian life. “Fellowship with God is more than orthodoxy. Love to God – a love which wholly possesses us is our supreme need” (Martin Lloyd Jones).

Knowing God is underlined by the prophets (Jeremiah 9:24; Hosea 6:3; Daniel 11:32). **Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent** (John 17:3). The heart's need is not met in things but in a person.

One of the weaknesses in some churches is an emphasis on activity, excitement, numbers, noise, feel-good factor. These things are often present, but there is little depth. The greatest days in church history were the days when private religion and family religion were taken seriously. All the meetings in the world will not make up for its lack.

We will still be thirsting for Him in heaven, because our capacity for Him is always increasing. But in heaven our thirst will always, perpetually and perfectly be satisfied.