

Praying the Psalms gives voice to our deepest yearnings in a way that teaches us how to pray the way Jesus prayed. If the Psalms are not only our words to God but God's inspired word to us, then we would expect the Psalms to correspond not only to our life experiences but to the life of Jesus Christ.

We look to the Psalms to find meaningful ways to express ourselves to God and to learn how God Incarnate in the Spirit prayed to the Father. Our praying imagination lines up the Psalms personally, congregationally, and Christologically. We pray out our pain and praise in the company of God's people, but we don't stop there. Jesus' Prayer Book invites us to line up the psalms with the life of Christ. The psalms open our minds to the testimony of Jesus. We discover that the Gospels and the Psalms are in sync. Our prayers echo our Lord's prayers.

Psalms 42 and 43 were composed by the Sons of Korah. The two psalms are linked so closely in thought, language and structure that they are better read as a single psalm.¹ At some point they were used separately for liturgical reasons but for the sake of our study and exposition we will consider them together. Three stanzas of equal length, each ending with a similar refrain, describe the psalmist's yearning for God.² "Dry, drowned, and disheartened," capture three "frank confessions," from a person who longs with his whole being for the fellowship of God.³ Kidner calls this "close-knit psalm, one of the most sadly beautiful in the Psalter."⁴

My God

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?*

¹ The Sons of Korah were from the tribe of Levi, descendants of Kohath. David put them in charge of the music "in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there" (1 Chron 6:22, 31, 38). Numbers 16 records the rebellion of Korah against Moses and Aaron and the devastating judgment against Korah and everyone associated with him. Even so, at least one of his sons survived and his descendants became worship leaders in Israel.

² In addition to a common refrain, as well as reflecting similar thought and language, Psalm 43 has no title or superscription. See Anderson, Psalms, 328.

³ Wilcock, Psalms, 155.

⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 165.

*Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.
Psalm 42:1-5*

Elohim is the preferred name for God in Book II. Psalm 42-43 uses *Yahweh* only once compared to nineteen times for Elohim.⁵ El is one of the most familiar designations for God in the ancient world, suggesting power and authority and overwhelming majesty. The plural form of El is Elohim, often called the plural of intensity, and is used over two thousand times in the Old Testament to refer to Israel's God. Elohim implies the superiority and transcendence of Israel's God over the gods. Every time Israel called their God, Elohim, they acknowledged in no uncertain terms that their God was the one and only living God.⁶ Far from being a generic name for God, Elohim was a theological declaration that Israel's God was "the great King above all gods" (Ps 95:3).

In Psalm 42-43 God is referenced repeatedly. Even though the psalmist feels abandoned and forsaken by God, God remains the focus of every thought and the impulse behind every concern. Clearly, the psalmist knows God personally. He freely speaks of "my God," "my Rock," "my stronghold," and "my Savior." He has made the "living God" or "the face of God" the sole object of his longing and straining. He yearns for the "house of God" and the "altar of God." The psalmist wants nothing more than to be in God's presence in order to quench his spiritual thirst, to save him from the rip currents, and to defend him against his enemies. In spite of his intense distress, God is his only hope and with every fiber of his being he longs to praise God.

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term "inscape" to describe the unique character of an object or subject as it relates to its environment. Landscapes give us the horizon. Inscapes give us the essence. The psalmist develops a theological *inscape* for the longing of the soul for God. He begins with a picture drawn from nature of a white-tailed deer panting for streams of water in a hot, dry climate. Animals and humans alike know what it is to be thirsty, especially in an arid, rocky land where the heat seems to be radiating from the white rocks. The psalm paints a picture that triggers a sensation – thirst.

One of the few times I remember being really thirsty was when my son Andrew and I went for a mountain bike run in the Inyo National Forest in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Mammoth California. We planned to bike for an hour. We worked our way up on trails past the tree line. We were moving along pretty fast, heedless of directions and trails, oblivious to the fact that we were getting lost in Sierras. We were tired, thirsty and ready to head back to the van, when I realized that we were lost. We spent the next four hours, without success trying to find our way back. Thankfully, we came upon a biker. "You must be the guys the Ranger is looking for," he said. He gave us water and with directions we made it back safe. But the signs of dehydration were obvious, our clothes were salt stained, and I wasn't thinking straight. I have never been as

⁵ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 84 n.4. Robertson writes, "Yahweh occurs 32 times in Book II, while Elohim occurs 198 times. In clearest contrast, Yahweh appears 278 times and Elohim 48 times in Book I."

⁶ H. B. Kuhn, "Names of God," 761-763, ZPEB. Kuhn writes, "Yahweh was revealed as an intensely personal name. . . tied inseparably with Israel's national awareness and was inescapably involved in Israel's unique covenant relation with Deity." (762).

thirsty and in need of water as that day.

This is how the psalmist feels. He's thirsty for God. When he says to his God, "my soul pants for you" he means that he yearns for God with his whole being. Soul describes who we are in the depth of our being. The soul is the vital, living being of the person, and the center of emotion, desire, intelligence, memory and passions. The soul is the thinking-feeling-loving self – the real you. It is one with the body, yet distinct from the body.⁷

We live in a dry and weary land and the human soul naturally thirsts for God. But we may not be conscious that our longings and our desires can only be met by God; that our thirsts can only be quenched by the living water God provides. Jesus worked this analogy between physical and spiritual thirst with the woman at the well. He promised her living water that would quench her thirst, "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:12). We may hardly know the difference between living for self in a me-centered world and living for Christ in a God-centered world. But the psalmist knows the difference. He's acutely aware of his need for God.

Two questions haunt his present experience. He cries out, "When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps 42:2). Literally, he wants to see the face of God. He longs to be in the very presence of God. His cry is desperate, followed by a painful description: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" This second water metaphor only compounds the pain of the first. Instead of thirst quenching water, he was "on a diet of [salty] tears – tears for breakfast, tears for supper" (Ps 42:3, MSG). Internally, he is raw, hurt by his confusion and confinement. Externally, he is harassed, taunted by his cynical foes. "All day long people knock at my door, pestering, 'Where is this God of yours?'" (Ps 42:3 MSG). He is caught between a "when" question that he cannot answer and a "where" question that he cannot determine. He is both frustrated by his faith in God and mocked for his faith in God.

A friend and I arranged to talk over coffee. The day before we met he phoned me and said, "I think we need to get together at your office, because every time I start talking I start balling and I don't want to make a scene." Theologian Cyril Okorochoa, an Anglican Bishop in Nigeria, writes, "This psalm was written by someone who felt great loneliness and depression. As such, it summons us to identify those in our community who feel this way, and take action on our own and along with our families and churches to help them."⁸ Matthew Henry agrees. If we are caught, as the psalmist was, between "inward distress" and "outward affliction" we may find ourselves praying "the melancholy expressions" of this psalm. But if not, we must, in praying this psalm "sympathize with those whose case they speak too plainly, and thank God it is not our own case; but those passages in it which express and excite holy desires towards God, and dependence on him, we must earnestly endeavor to bring our minds up to."⁹

The psalmist teaches us how to pour out our soul. It is right and good for us to cry out to God in prayer and worship. He deliberately remembers the joy of worship, the holy pilgrimage to the

⁷ Webster, Soulcraft, 12.

⁸ Okorochoa, Psalms, 647, in Africa Bible Commentary.

⁹ Matthew Henry, Psalms, 179.

house of God, “the exuberant singing of the people,” the festive throng making their way to Jerusalem.¹⁰ It takes honesty to draw this stark contrast because many in the throes of depression want to paint the past with the dark colors of the present. By drawing on his memory the psalmist resists spiritual amnesia even as he refuses to anaesthetize his soul. He neither evades the truth nor escapes his feelings. This is not “a forced nostalgia” but a necessary spiritual discipline that sets up the refrain.¹¹ This psalm counsels us to confront and express our yearning for God and our frustrations with life honestly. We are encouraged to place the painful present in the context of God’s redeeming grace. And thirdly, we are instructed to talk to ourselves in the presence of God by the example of the psalmist.

The refrain is repeated three times in slightly different ways (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5) emphasizing the wisdom of self-exhortation before God. In worship, we need to talk to ourselves in a way that is honest, faithful, and expectant. In daily devotions and in public worship there is and ought to be a lot going on inside the worshiper. When real worship splits the atom of our souls the release of life-changing energy is significant.

The two previous “when” and “where” questions are eclipsed by the psalmist’s “why” question. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why do you murmur within me?”¹² The previous questions seem to build to this internal self-question. There is an inner debate boiling up in the soul of the psalmist between despair and devotion. Through prayer he rebukes himself for his discouragement and challenges himself to hope in God. His self-talk is not meaningless god-talk, but necessary spiritual direction directed to his soul in the presence of God. He refuses to see himself as the helpless victim of his emotions.¹³ By having this internal conversation in God’s hearing, he is saying to God, “Do you see how I am battling with this experience?”¹⁴

This internal dialogue is necessary. If the psalmist was turned in on himself he would not be carrying on this dialogue in the presence of God. His mournful wrestling with reality is a matter of integrity and exemplifies his faithful practice of the spiritual disciplines. He not only laments his sorry state to himself but chides himself to put his hope in God. To say that deliverance begins when he stops speaking to himself and turns from his memories and burdens to God fails to comprehend the depth of his sorrow and his passion for God.¹⁵ The psalmist is true to life. “Doubt and faith are in a wrestling match, first one on top and then the other, in shifting supremacies.”¹⁶

He issues an imperative to his soul, “Put your hope in God,” in anticipation of divine intervention resulting in praise and thanksgiving, “For I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” Literally, the sentence reads, the “salvation from his (God’s) face,” or “the deliverance that comes from his (God’s) face.”¹⁷ The promised change from lament to praise echos the blessing of

¹⁰ Ross, Psalms, 21

¹¹ Craigie, Psalms, 326.

¹² Ross, Psalms, 12.

¹³ Wilcock, Psalms, 157.

¹⁴ Goldingay, Psalms, 26.

¹⁵ Craigie, Psalms, 329.

¹⁶ Peterson, Answering God, 107.

¹⁷ Ross, Psalms, 22; Goldingay, Psalms, 25.

Aaron, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26).

The Lord’s Loyal Love

*My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.
By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me –
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.*

Psalm 42:6-11

The second stanza signals no change in the psalmist’s outlook. He is still downcast and depressed. My friend and colleague Dr. Robert Smith, Jr. knows the depth of the psalmist’s pain. His son Tony was murdered while working at a fast food restaurant. Robert’s mother lives less than a half-mile from where Tony was shot to death. Robert writes:

“Since October 30, 2010, I have driven to my mother’s house many times. The most convenient way to get to my mother’s house from my home is to go past the restaurant where Tony was killed and to make a left-hand turn on the street where my mother resides. Not one time have I been able to drive past that restaurant. I always take the long way around and make many different out-of-the-way turns to get to my mother’s house. The wound is too tender, and the sight too painful for me to look at that restaurant and see the counter through the front glass where our son’s murderer stood, firing one shot into his body and extinguishing the flame of Tony’s life, and to pass by the parking lot where Tony collapsed soon

thereafter. . . Perhaps someday I will be able to go into the parking lot and stand over the place where Tony passed away from death to life. Holidays and other particular days are difficult now – Christmas, Easter, birthdays, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Independence Day, weddings, and funerals, especially October 30. This experience has become a door through which I have walked into the abounding love of Christ and not a wall that restrained me from discovering wholesome forgiveness.”¹⁸

The psalmist experiences deep pain and depression while at the same time putting his hope in God. This painful paradox of depression and devotion runs through this psalm and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding and experience of true spirituality. The psalmist illustrates how a truly troubled soul can yet be God-honoring. Dr. Robert Smith illustrates well both sides of this paradox. He is still so deeply disturbed by the murder of his son that he cannot drive by the murder scene and he has to take a circuitous route to his mother’s house. Nevertheless Dr. Smith reached out to his son’s murderer in a penitentiary to say, “Jesus loves and forgives you and so do I.”¹⁹ And in subsequent correspondence he conveyed to the young man that the reason he wanted to stay in contact with him was because he wanted him “to see that God is able to recycle, reclaim, and restore the brokenness in our lives. . . .God does not waste pain – He redeems pain!”²⁰ Robert cannot bring himself to drive by the murder scene, but he can reach out to his son’s murderer. Deep grief and amazing love meet in a person who is shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ – a father who cannot bare the sight of the place where his son died and an ambassador of Christ reaching out to share the love of Christ.

The psalmist parallels his opening picture of the deer panting after streams of water in stanza one with his present situation in the far north of Israel on the border with Syria. He is far removed from the house of God in Jerusalem. This is where the headwaters of the Jordan spring up from underground streams under Mount Hermon. He pictures himself caught in a raging torrent of water crashing over him. Instead of being parched and thirsty, this third water metaphor captures his near-drowning. Whether the psalmist is literally in the far north of Israel far removed from Jerusalem and in danger of drowning is hard to say. What is clear is that this region offered the psalmist a remote and hostile environment emblematic of his feelings of desperation and abandonment.

Yet despite being downcast and disturbed, the psalmist remembers God. He voices his purpose to God with clarity: “Therefore I will remember you.” The remembering is his soulful defense against internal depression and external opposition. He has gone beyond the memories of “pilgrim crowds and festivals” and is determined “to harness his memory toward the resolution of his plight.”²¹ “The psalmist keeps asserting his faith,” acknowledging that the Lord [Yahweh] is still commanding his loyal love and giving him a song to sing and protecting his life.²² Remembering God does not change his circumstances or silence his foes or alleviate his pain, but it does inspire his prayer: “I say to God my Rock. . .”

¹⁸ Robert Smith, Jr. *The Oasis of God: From Mourning to Morning* (Biblical Insights from Psalm 42 & 43). Mountain Home, AR: BorderStone Press, 2014. 152-153.

¹⁹ Smith, 22.

²⁰ Smith, 23.

²¹ Craige, *Psalms*, 326.

²² Ross, *Psalms*, 25.

Once again the refrain challenges the state of his soul and he declares, as God is his witness, “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Ps 42:11). Literally, the last line reads, “the salvation of my face and my God.” Asians speak of “saving face” and C. S. Lewis wrote a novel entitled “Til We Have Faces.” The metaphor stands for the salvation of our whole being. To be saved is to live in a face-to-face relationship with God. The psalmist “summons his faith in the Lord, a faith that expects to praise him.”²³

It is not difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalm 42-43 when he was in the region of Caesarea Philippi at the base of Mount Hermon (modern day Banias). This region is the northernmost border of Israel and the furthest point of Jesus’ journey from Jerusalem. He and his disciples walked along a deep gorge, “through which there roars a headlong stream.”²⁴ As they ascended the mountain, they encountered pilgrims on their way to worship at shrines to the Syrian god Baal, the Greek god Pan, and the Roman god-head of Caesar.²⁵ They saw a deep cavern and shrines embedded in the rock on the slopes of Mount Hermon. On the boundary between Israel and the world, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” It is here where Jesus distinguishes between opinion and confession. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” And Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The fact that this conversation took place here on the border between Israel and the world “hints of the world-missionary significance of the confession of Christ.”²⁶

If we picture Jesus praying these psalms we can line up the expectation of the cross with his feelings of being God-forsaken. He who compared our physical thirst for water to our deep thirst for living water identified with this psalm. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38). He who wept over Jerusalem resonated with the psalmist’s endless flow of tears (John 11:35). Echoes of Psalm 42-43 can be found in Jesus’ prediction of his death, when he said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour” (John 12:27). Even the psalmist’s reference to “God my Rock” (Ps 42:9) in the context of the pagan shrines embedded in the rock at Mount Hermon makes us think of this psalm when Jesus declared to Peter, “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18).

Send Me Your Light

*Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.
Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.
You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?
Why must I go about mourning,*

²³ Ross, Psalms, 27.

²⁴ E. M. Blaiklock, “Caesarea Philippi,” ZPEB, 682.

²⁵ Bruner, Matthew vol.2, 119.

²⁶ Bruner, Matthew, vol.2, 119.

*oppressed by the enemy?
Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God. [the salvation of my face and my God].*
Psalm 43:1-5

The struggle continues, the opposition remains, and the feeling of being abandoned by God persists. But we sense a shift in tone. The landscape is still fraught with danger but the inscape has become more resilient and resolute. The psalmist's confidence has grown as the expectation of salvation has become more vivid. He acknowledges God's sovereignty over everything that happens to him, even his persistent feelings of being rejected by God. Yet his devotion has only grown more intense. He clings to God in the most positive way. His "my God" confession underscores Yahweh's loyal love and his only hope for vindication. In the space of five verses, the psalmist declares that "my God" is his vindicator, advocate, rescuer, and stronghold. He calls for God's light and truth to lead him into God's presence, so he can go up to "the altar of God" to express "my joy and my delight." The psalmist's internal confusion appears to be healing and his confidence against external opposition is growing stronger. His circumstances have not changed and the psalm's refrain remains the same, but in prayer he has changed.

Once again it is not difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalms 42 and 43 as he began the journey south to Jerusalem and to the cross. The paradox of the Father's love and the Father's rejection shaped his understanding of what soon must take place. His prayer for vindication before an "unfaithful nation" recalls the apostle John's description, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). The psalmist's use of the word "nation" does not imply a particular political entity or a foreign nation. The term describes "a conglomeration of people."²⁷ In John 17, Jesus frames the world's unbelief in a similar manner. He gathers up all the rejection and opposition into an impersonal collective – the world. Jesus identified with the psalmist's prayer, "Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked" (Ps 43:1). And to those who mourn he offered his blessing (Matt 5:4).

When the psalmist prayed, "Send me your light and your faithful care [truthfulness], let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell" (Ps 43:3), he

²⁷ Ross, Psalms, 28.

was not asking for help in the abstract. This was not a rhetorical flourish. He was praying for “someone who explicitly embodies God’s own qualities. . . . The emissary thus brings God in person.”²⁸ Nevertheless the psalmist never imagined how literally God intended to fulfill his prayer. But Jesus did. How could our Savior not see himself in this psalm? He testified that he was the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life (John 8:12; 14:6). He embodied the message of God. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Undoubtedly, Psalm 42-43 shaped, supported, and confirmed Jesus’ self-understanding.

The psalm begins and ends with the psalmist’s yearning for God. He longs to “go to the altar of God,” not just to participate in a sacrificial ritual, but to go to God, in whose presence he finds his true joy and delight. “O God, my God” is the exclamation of a person who “strains for God and thirsts for God.”²⁹ Jesus prayed this psalm knowing that he was the sacrifice to be placed on the altar of God. The psalmist’s running refrain (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5) corresponds to Jesus’ Gethsemane experience, where he “was deeply distressed and troubled.” He said to his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:33-34). We would be naive to think that these emotions had no touchstone in the psalms and that they had not been long felt by the one who came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Hebrews declares, “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat,” because Jesus “suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (Heb 13:10, 12). George Herbert’s poem, *The Altar*, first published in 1633, captures the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf:

A broken ALTAR, Lord thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman’s tool hath touched the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy power doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.³⁰

²⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 32.

²⁹ Goldingay, Psalms, 33.

³⁰ George Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple*, John Wall, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p.139. George Herbert (1593-1633) served as an Anglican priest in rural England. Note the many implicit biblical references in his poem (Ps 51:17; Deut 27:2-6; 2 Cor 3:2-3; Ezek 36:25-27; Zech 7:12; Lk 19:40.

