

Psalms 42,43: FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

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What should we call the collection of poems found in the centre of our Bibles?

The Greek speaking Jews called the collection '*Psalms*' ['Strummings'] – a word derived from an ancient stringed instrument (*psalterion*) not too different from a guitar Hebrew-speaking Jews called the collection '*Praises*'

I rather like the suggestion (by Nick Page) that we call the collection '*Mood Swings*'. For this collection of poems is an emotional roller coaster: one minute you hit the heights, and the next minute you're in deepest despair. It is this feature of the Psalms which makes them so user-friendly – for it mirrors our own mood-swings.

Today I want us to focus on one of the most popular of Psalms where the mood swings from despair to hope. The Psalm in question is Psalm 42 & Psalm 43.

Incidentally, do notice that Psalm 42 & Psalm 43 form one Psalm.

Although in most Bibles Psalms 42 & 43 are treated as two independent units, they are almost certainly *one psalm*.

The evidence for this is fourfold

- First, there is a common 'refrain' or 'chorus' at the end of each section of the two psalms: "**Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him, my saviour and my God**". This refrain is found three times: 42.5; 42.11; and 43.5
- Second, both psalms are written in the same metre
- Thirdly, both psalms are similar in thought & language
- Fourthly, unlike most other psalms in this section of the Psalter Ps 43 has no title or superscription

For these reasons the REB prints Ps 42 & 43 as one Psalm

The GNB prints Ps 43 separately but heads it with the words "*continuation of Ps 42*"

Enough of introductions - let's get down to the meat of the Psalm.

It divides neatly into three sections, each ending with the refrain: 42.1-5; 42.6-11; 43.1-5

1. I THIRST (Ps 42.1-5)

Athanasius, an early church father, said: "*Most of Scripture speaks TO us, while the Psalms speak FOR us*".

I wonder whether anybody here feels that Ps 42/43 speaks for them?

i) A universal experience

In one sense *the opening lines speak for us all*

Ps 42.1f: "**As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for you, the living God; when can I go and worship in your presence?**"

There is not a man or woman who does not know something of this thirst for God.

Deep down within each one of us there is an inner longing - a desire - to commune with our Maker.

Unlike the rest of creation, we have been made to have fellowship with the Living God. We have been made "**in the image of God**", and by that Scripture means that we have been made to relate to God.

Even although sin has thrust us out of God's presence, in the hearts of each one of us there is still a deep longing to be re-united with our God.

Augustine, the great North African theologian who was born in AD 350, wrote: "*the heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee*".

There is, as it were, **a God-shaped blank within us** - with the result that until we have found God, we feel - and are! - unfulfilled.

We may have everything this world can give, yet without God we have nothing.

In this sense the Psalmist with his talk of thirsting for God speaks for us all - he is describing an experience common to us all.

ii) A special experience

And yet as I read this Psalm I sense a peculiar intensity to it.

v2,3: "**I thirst for you the living God...Day and night I cry, and tears are my only food**".

Here is a man who is **desperate for God** - who cries out for God - who has such a thirst for God that nothing else can satisfy. NEB: "**With my whole being I thirst for God**".

To appreciate the metaphor we have to understand that **in Palestine rain** (and not sun) **is often good news**. Certainly this was true in the summer. For from May to Sept the sun beats down ceaselessly & bakes the land. There is no rain at that time, with the result that very few rivers flow all year round. The climate is OK for a camel with its built-in water-conservation equipment, but it is sheer torture for deer that "**longs for a stream of cool water**".

The Psalmist pictures a deer roaming the countryside, straining its head for the smell & sound of running water. It is desperate for water. Without water it will die.

"**So I long for you, the living God**" (v1), says the Psalmist. He is desperate for God.

Faith for him was no optional extra - rather it was the most basic function of life.

Without God, for him life was unliveable.

Who is this man? We don't know - the precise background is uncertain.

One thing for sure: he was **cut off from the Temple at Jerusalem** and from the worship of God there.

Possibly he was sick - alternatively he had been taken away as a POW

From v6 it appears that he used to live in the area later named Caesarea Philippi, for it is the place where the springs of the River Jordan rush down from the valley in roaring cataracts from the southern slopes of Mt Hermon.

Whoever, he was **miserable** - he was depressed.

It would appear that in the past he had had a special place in the worship of God

- the superscription to Ps 42 shows that he belonged to the clan of Korah, a musician
- v4 which indicates that he used to lead the festival crowd in procession.

But all that was past. He was now far from Jerusalem - cut off from God.

I wonder: is there anybody here like him - feeling cut off from God?

Is your experience of God now not what it used to be?

You still come dutifully to church, and yet you ache within: worship has become an empty ritual.

With the Psalmist you remember past experiences of God & long to know God again.

v4: **"My heart breaks when I remember the past, when I went with the crowds to the house of God and led them as they walked along, a happy crowd, singing and shouting praise to God"**

Yes, you remember those festival occasions, when the church was crowded with worshippers: Christmas - Easter - a baptismal service - maybe your baptismal service - then God was real, he was near. BUT now everything is different. Now God is absent. And you are in the depths.

At this point the Psalmist introduces what becomes a refrain

v5: **"Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him, my saviour and my God"**

It seems to me that the emphasis is on the Psalmist's feelings of depression.

This comes out particularly clearly in REB: **"How deep I am sunk in misery, groaning in my distress"**.

Somehow the call to hope in God is just jargon, and is not truly meant.

Faith for the most part is absent. **Misery prevails.**

Are there not times when you have acted in the same way?

In your distress you have gone through the forms of religion, but you have not filled those forms with content.

Faith has had no cutting edge. You have not believed what you have sung.

Indeed, you may well be worse for having come to church.

If that is the case, the Psalmist very much speaks for you.

2 I AM OVERWHELMED (Ps 42.6-11)

With the second section of the Psalm, there is a change in metaphor.

Whereas in the opening metaphor water was scarce, here there is just too much of it.

v7: **" He has sent waves of sorrow over my soul; chaos roars at me like a flood, like waterfalls thundering down to the Jordan from Mount Hermon & Mount Mizor"**.

As the Psalmist seeks to focus his mind on God, he is overwhelmed by all his troubles. The sound of the crashing waterfalls around him remind him of the crashing waters of chaos that now threaten to overwhelm his soul.

To understand the Psalmist's thought-process, we need to remember that water in Near Eastern thought was a symbol of a world out of control.

Thus in the ancient creation story found in Gen 1 we read of God bringing order out of chaos by separating the waters and making heaven & earth.

The Psalmist feels that his whole world is breaking apart. Nothing is making sense.

God no longer feels in control. And so he cries out: v6: **"My heart is breaking"**

He is as miserable as sin

- tormented by the thought that God has forgotten him
- taunted by his enemies who jeer: **"Where is your God?"** (v3).

Yes, where is God

- when all hell breaks loose?
- when everything goes wrong in life?
- when disappointment or tragedy strike?

Can we really believe God loves us and cares for us, if he allows his children to struggle and suffer.

There are no easy answers.

And yet from this side of the Cross it is perhaps easier to cope with misfortune.

For in Jesus our God has identified himself with us in our weakness/frailty.

In Jesus our God has trod a road of tears, and worn a crown of thorns.

Jesus knew what it was like to be rejected by his contemporaries - indeed, at the last he even felt himself rejected by God as he cried out: "**My God (2x) why did you abandon me?**" (Mark 15.34)

To the sufferer for whom God is distant, all I can say is "*Look to the Cross. See there - God loves - cares - knows - understands*".

But the Psalmist had no inkling of such a Saviour.

He therefore keeps on repeating to himself: "**Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him, my saviour and my God**"

The Psalmist tries to be a man of faith, and yet he seems to have very little confidence in God.

3. I WILL PRAISE YOU (Ps 43.1-5)

All of a sudden - in the third section of the Psalm - the breakthrough comes.

Up until then the Psalmist had really been speaking to himself.

But now he turns to God and begins to speak directly to him.

43.1: "**O God, declare me innocent and defend my cause against the ungodly**"

The moment the Psalmist begins to talk to God, that moment he appears to turn the corner and move out of his depression.

True, the problems are still the same, but now at last he is able to actually bring God into them.

43.2: "**You are my protector; why have you abandoned me? Why must I go on suffering from the cruelty of my enemies?**"

Questions still remain, but the Psalmist is now able to share them with God.

Instead of complaining about God, he now complains to God

And as he begins to actually talk to God his confidence returns.

43.3: "**Send out your light and your truth; may they lead me and bring me back to Zion, your sacred hill, and to your Temple, where you live**"

Some have suggested the Psalmist is here alluding to the pillar of cloud and of fire that guided the people of Israel through the desert. If so, then he was saying: "*Lord, guide me through this particular desert experience - hold my hand and bring me back into your presence*"

God may still seem to be distant, but the Psalmist realises that God is not absent.

In spite of the difficulties of life, he now realises that God has not given up on him.

He looks forward to renewing his experience of God.

And so he says: 43.4: "**Then I will go to your altar, O God; you are the source of my happiness. I will play my harp and sing praise to you, O God, my God**"

Is this the same man who at the beginning the Psalm speaks of his crying "**day and night**" and whose "**tears**" have been his "**only food**" (42.3)

What a change has taken place! The man is scarcely recognisable.

That it is the same man is indicated by the refrain which rounds off the Psalm: "**Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him, my saviour and my God**"

But this time the emphasis is on the second half of the refrain.

The emphasis is no longer on how miserable he feels, but rather on how hopeful he feels.

In spite of all his troubles, he has found a new confidence in God.

In a new spirit of faith he now waits expectantly for God to act.

The night will soon be over, the day will come!

Questions are replaced by expectations: "**once again I shall praise him**".

What does all this say to us?

Surely this: when the outlook is grim, we should try the up-look.

Yes, for most if not all of us, there will be times when life gets rough - when troubles afflict us from without, and doubts assail us from within.

There will be times when God seems to be distant, if not absent - when he may even seem to have forgotten us - to have abandoned us.

The temptation is for us to turn our back on him. To moan and groan about our lot to ourselves and to our friends - but fail to turn to the one who really counts.

The Psalmist encourages us at such times, to turn to God

To share with him our troubles/ our feelings/ our questions/ our anger - yes, even our anger with God. For it is precisely when we are real with God, that he will be real with us.

Our circumstances may not change - life may still be tough - but in the darkness we shall discover that God has not let go of us, and what a difference that makes.

Yes, we need to allow faith and not feelings to have the last word.

And with time (and it may well take time) we shall experience God again - and as we do so we shall discover that ***even in those dark times God was at work in us, moulding us, refining us, making us deeper and richer individuals.***