

## The Christian Experience of Desiring God

Psalm 42:1-11

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I invite you to turn with me to Psalm 42. On Sunday evening, August 17, 1997—right about a year after I came to First Presbyterian Church—we finished a year-long study of the first book of the Psalms: Psalm 1 through Psalm 41. And, of course, in Psalm 41 we dealt with the calamities and comforts of God's people in a fallen world. I said then that we would come back to the Psalms again, and here we are about six years later in the second book of the Psalms. Now we've covered a lot of ground on Sunday evenings since August 17, 1997. We've been through Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Obadiah. We've been through Daniel and Genesis—two years in Genesis from 1998-2000. Derek has walked us through the life of Elijah. We've covered a good bit of Exodus on Sunday nights. In between our exposition of Exodus, Derek has preached us through the marks of grace, the book of Joshua, the issue of marriage; and we've been through parts of the Gospel of John with Derek. And who can forget the "Summer of Solomon," 2003, and the Song of Songs? I promise I won't ask you to come up tonight and continue on, Derek. I know you're relieved. But here we are finally back to the Psalms.

You know, it was a special season in 1996 and 1997 as we went through the Psalms together on Lord's Day evenings. Many of you commented as to how timely those expositions were for issues of your life, but so much has happened since then, hasn't it? There have been long goodbyes, and there have been home goings, and there have been heartaches. There have been broken homes. There have been unspeakable tragedies in our congregation. We need the Psalms again. And so here we are in the second book of the Psalms.

These Psalms stand in stark contrast to the comfortable spirituality of our own age. Many Christians are told by spiritual leaders that they ought to expect a life without struggle or pain or weakness or difficulty, a life without a sense of absolute tragedy. But when you read the Psalms and you read the anguish of the Psalmist's heart, there you find the resources for a spirituality which is far deeper than the surface and which really meets the realities of our present experience, because the Psalmist deals with the hard realities of life, and he pours his soul out to the living God. He pours his complaints out to God, his heartaches out to God, his emptiness out to God. All of these things he brings right to God. And

until we recover that kind of a spirituality, we'll continue to float on the surface and ignore the wealth of the riches given to us in the word of God and, especially, in the Psalms.

You know, the Reformers thought we not only ought to sing the Psalms but that we ought to have the Psalms as the very core of a well-rounded, Christian experience. The Reformers taught that the Psalms were the book of Christian experience. Now as we look at this second book of the Psalms running from Psalm 42 to Psalm 72, two themes we will come back to over and over again. We'll have a "twin focus," and we'll remind ourselves of this focus regularly. First of all, we're going to ask regularly, What does this Psalm teach me about Christ? And then second we'll ask the question, What does this Psalm teach me about Christian experience? Now as we prepare for the hearing of God's word, read and proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer.

*Our Lord and our God, Your word is truth, and it is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, but especially this book of the Psalms. It is the book of the heart of the people of God, and it is the book of the heart of Christ. We pray that in reading it, in hearing it-- in hearing it read and proclaimed aloud-- in the gathering of Your people, Lord's Day evening after Lord's Day evening over these next weeks together, that we would be moved to a deeper appreciation of who You are, to a deeper appreciation of the person and the glory of Christ and to a deeper capacity in our own Christian experience. And we pray that in all this, You would be glorified and we would be helped. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Turn with me now to Psalm 42, and let us hear God's word.

As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence. O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember Thee from the land of the Jordan, and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the sound of thy waterfalls; all Thy breakers and Thy waves have rolled over me. The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and his song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life. I will say to God my rock, "Why hast Thou forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the

help of my countenance and my God.”

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God’s holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Psalm 42 and 43. It must have been sometime in the 1940s when David Martyn Lloyd-Jones first expounded those two Psalms to his congregation. And it became a book, a book which perhaps many of you have read: it’s called *Spiritual Depression*. Despite its title, it is one of the most encouraging books that a Christian could possibly read because he deals with the sources, the causes, and the cure of the spiritual depression that we encounter as believers. And it was his exposition of these two Psalms, 42 and 43, that started him down the road of producing that great material.

For whatever reason the Psalmist in this Psalm is literally unable to be at corporate worship; he is separated from the sanctuary worship, the temple worship, of his God, the living God, and the very thought of it is killing him. And on top of that, for whatever reason, around him are gathered enemies who are reviling him and questioning God’s covenant faithfulness. And the thought of God’s covenant faithfulness being questioned by the enemies of God is killing him, and it drives him almost to the point of complete despair. And in this Psalm he cries out to God for help in the midst of those two struggles. Derek Kidner says that “this Psalm is one of the most sadly beautiful in the Psalter.” And that’s so true.

I want to especially focus on the first five verses of this Psalm, but as we overview the whole Psalm, I want to emphasize two things. First of all, as you look at verses 1-5, you will see the Psalmist expressing a longing for God in exile from corporate worship. He isn’t able to be with the people of God in the temple worshipping the one true God. And he’s longing to be there. That’s the theme of the first five verses.

Then when you look at verses 6-11, you will see the cry of a troubled heart. On top of not being able to be with the people of God in the house of God in the worship of God, communing with the living God, on top of that his heart is deeply troubled by a multitude of spiritual challenges. And it leads him to cry from his troubled heart to God for help. Those are the two parts of this Psalm: 1) verses 1-5: a longing for God in exile from corporate worship and 2) verses 6-11: the cry of a troubled heart to God. Let’s start with verses 1-5.

This Psalm is instructed to be given to the choir director. It’s something for the choir director to lead the people of God in singing; it’s to be a part of their corporate expression though it is an individual experience. That’s interesting because it’s an individual talking about how he misses corporate worship. And it’s given to the choir director by the sons of Korah for the purpose of the people of God in corporate worship appreciating what it is to lose the privilege of corporate

worship. Surely there's a sermon in that in and of itself. But I want you to note that these sons of Korah were special Levites, Levites who had temple responsibilities as temple musicians. The choir director, the Bill Wymond of the temple, had temple musicians working along with him, and these sons of Korah, we're told in 2 Chronicles, did just that: they sang in the temple. And that very realization leads Derek Kidner to speculate that this Psalm is the lament of one of these temple Levites who was way off in the north of Israel, separated from the temple and from the people of God and from the worship which he has had the glorious privilege of leading in. And he's longing to be back at God's house, and he's turning his longing into a prayer and a song of faith and hope in God Himself. But whatever the case it is, whoever this is, whoever's experience this is; this believer has been kept from the house of God and from the worship of God, and he is in spiritual torture over it.

To long to see the face of God. Look at verse 2: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God?" To long to see the face of God, this is the desire of his heart: to see the face of God, to appear before God in the worship of the sanctuary. This believer, whoever he is, has a right estimation of the value of corporate worship. He seeks through the ordinances of the public, the corporate worship of the people of God, to encounter the living God, to appear before the living God, to see the face of the living God. And he also understands that the focus of the ordinance of worship is God Himself.

Notice verse 1: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God." It's not just the outward glory of Old Testament temple worship that he misses. He does mention remembering being in the processional. And surely it would've been a spectacular thing to see the worship of the old covenant temple, but that is not the thing that he misses most about being in the temple of God. What he misses is God. He understands that the means of grace are just that: they are means to get us to God, to get us into fellowship with God, to get us a taste of God, to get us the experience of God in His promises and in His person and in His glory. And not being able to participate in those means of grace is spiritual torture to him because he knows that those means have been a means of blessing him with the experience of the presence and the person of God. He is a worshipper who, for whatever reason, can't worship; he can't be in the house of God, and it's absolutely killing him.

Love for God's house, you see, is of the essence of true piety. And that is true in both the old covenant and the new covenant. Yes, God's house has changed: God's house is no longer that glorious temple in Jerusalem. God's house is now *you*, the people of God, wherever you are gathered. If you were gathered in the Winn-Dixie parking lot, gathered for the purpose of the worship of the living God and not in this glorious building, you would still be the house of God. And we would still be able to worship in spirit and in truth utilizing the means of grace which God has provided us. But for the believer in both the New Testament and the Old, a longing to be with the people of God in the corporate praise of God is

of the essence of piety. And this Old Testament believer understood that.

And when we voluntarily absent ourselves from worship, we show a lack of appreciation for the communion of God in the ordinances, in the means of grace. William Plumer, the great Southern Presbyterian Bible scholar, said, "Ought not those who go into voluntary exile from God's worship to suspect that not all is right with them?" That's a searching question, and it's raised for us by the very grief of this Old Testament believer at the thought of the worship of God of which he is bereft. True godliness, you see, consists more in the desire of the heart for grace and for fellowship knowledge of God than in satisfaction with what we've already attained. And this Old Testament believer can't get enough of God. And he knows that God has appointed that especially in His worship in the midst of His people He is there in a presence which He manifests nowhere else. Jesus will talk about this in the book of Matthew when he says in Matthew 18 that "when two or three are gathered in His name there He is." He promises to be there in a unique way with His people as they are gathered for the worship of God as the church of God. And true godliness longs for the blessing of God in that particular circumstance. And there's the experiential application of this truth. There's the Christian experience that's being taught to us in this Psalm: the Christian, too, is to pant after the living God, but not for an isolated, individual, extraordinary experience of the living God off by ourselves somewhere; but an experience of the living God together with the people of God under His word as the house of God.

But of course, ultimately this Psalm reveals to us Christ, doesn't it? Because Christ is the "great worshipper"--Christ Himself. It is His meet to do the will of the Heavenly Father, and it is His desire to lead brothers in the assembly of praise. And He Himself knew separation from the house of God, and He knew persecution from those who hated Him and who called into question the faithfulness of God. Listen to what Horatius Bonar says of this Psalm and the Lord Jesus Christ: "The sorest pang of Christ arising from reproach and scorn was that which He felt when they cast suspicion on the love and faithfulness of His Father, 'Where is Thy God?' In proportion as sanctification advances, His members feel this too, forgetting their own glory and intent upon His. In the primary use of the Psalm, this taunt would be felt by David when his enemies insinuated that though God had anointed him king, yet He could not bring to His kingdom. Or even if the sons of Korah wrote this Psalm, there would be the same feeling in them with regard to this taunt flung at the devoted leader whose cause they espoused coming to him at Ziklag. But the Holy Ghost founded on these circumstances a song of Zion that was meant for Zion's king and all their princes in their passage to the throne and kingdom.

The Lord Jesus might specially call it to mind and sing it with His disciples on that remarkable day at Caesarea Philippi when he asked them, 'What are men saying of Me?' On that day Hermon was in sight and Jordan's double-fountain close beside him in some *Little Hill* near them, some Mizar, that by contrast called up to

his mind the *Hills of Zion*. And on that day it may be the head of the church made special use of this Psalm, and embalmed it in the hearts of His disciples who would never afterward fail to sing it, even as we do, with double refreshment in the thought that it had comforted the Master, expressing as it does the righteous One in His weariness looking up to the Father for refreshment.”

But you know there is some biblical evidence about what Bonar is pointing to here because on the cross, as Christ’s enemies hurl insults at Him and say that if God is His God, surely He will come and rescue Him in His hour of need, Jesus Himself lifts up Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” And Jesus had already in John 12 expressed the trouble of heart spoken of here in verse 5 and in verse 11: “My soul is troubled within Me.” Do you remember as Derek preached us through John, the Gospel of John, and we came to that point where Jesus, upon entering into Jerusalem the week of His Passion could say, “My soul, My heart is troubled within Me.”? He was deeply distressed, and the Father spoke to Him in comfort in that very hour.

But even as Jesus lifts up Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” you know that He remembers Psalm 22:22. Turn with me there. Twenty-one verses down in that Psalm, which surely our Savior knew by heart, there is even in the midst of this cry of forsakenness this assuring declaration, “I will tell of Thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise Thee.” Even as it was the meet of our Savior to do the will of His Heavenly Father, so also He was determined to be the “chief worshipper.” And so in this Psalm we see expressed His desire to lead in the covenant worship of the living God.

God would teach us here, friends, of the heart desire which is at the core of true worship. Christ is the great worshipper, but His longing to worship the living God in the deepest extremity of His life is but a call to us to long to worship the living God, to desire for more grace and more fellowship knowledge of God as we come together under the worship of the living God.

We’ll continue, and we’ll look at verses 6-11 when we gather to look at the 43rd Psalm next time. But as we think on these truths tonight, surely we would ask ourselves whether God Himself is our greatest desire, and if we long for Him above all things else, and if we long to be in the worship of the living God. And if we don’t, we need to ask ourselves with Plumer, “What is amiss with us?” What is wrong? For if the Savior and the saints long to be with the living God in worship and we don’t, then whose are we? Let’s pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your Word and how it beckons us to worship. And I thank You for this gathered people who have come this night to hear Your word and to sing Your praises. Deepen our love for Christ so that we*

would say, "More love to Thee, O Christ; more love to Thee." Deepen our affections for God that we would say, "Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land." And even as we thirst, assuage our thirst with Yourself by Christ as we seek You by faith in His name. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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