

Spiritual Desperation

Psalm 42 is often looked upon as a lovely Psalm. At first sight, it may conjure up a pleasant, almost romantic image of a deer drinking at a stream.

The reality is totally different. This is not a sweet picture of everything at rest but a dramatic portrayal of desperation. The deer is not drinking, it is gasping for water. The poet is gasping for real knowledge of God.

This is a poem of UNFULFILLED DESIRE FOR GOD! Fortunately, when we read it together with **Psalm 43**, we can see that the poet found the answer to his needs and we can find the answer to ours. Are we prepared to be honest and admit to having needs? How deep are they in reality? Can the Lord really meet my needs?

The word “soul” turns up six times in **Psalm 42** and once in **Psalm 43**. Our soul is where all our personality is active; in modern terms, it is the “interface” between our spirit and our body. In **Genesis 2:7**, man became a living soul (NIV “living being”) when God breathed the breath (= “spirit” in Hebrew) into man's newly-formed body. Our soul includes our mind, will and emotions, where we do our thinking, deciding and feeling.

The writer is in a mess and he is very conscious of it. His feelings are of desperation, a sense of thirst for reality with God, a deep longing for a real knowledge of the presence of the living God. He longs for God himself like a thirsty deer in a parched land (**v.1**), he desperately wants to see him face to face (**v.2**) and he is in tears about it all the time (**v.3**).

When he starts thinking about it, he gets worse. He remembers times when it seemed to be better (**v.4**), he is provoked by the awkward questions asked by unbelievers (**vv.3 & 10**) and he starts asking why things are not right (**v.5,9 & 11** and **Psalm 43:2 & 5**).

All of this makes him unable to act decisively. Like him, when we are downcast, depressed, despairing and disturbed (**v.5,11 & Ps.43:5**), we find it numbing, paralysing our ability to make decisions and take action. We feel remote, just as the poet knows that he is miles away from the temple in Jerusalem, the place which symbolised and actually was (in those days) the presence of God (**v.6**).

If we met this man we might try some of our amateur psychology on him. If this did not work, we might suggest that he went for counselling. The

professionals would have a name for his psychological condition and recommend treatment.

He is a man with experience of God, who has been in leadership among God's people (**v.4**) but he is not satisfied. In fact, he is desperate, determined above everything else to know God's real personal and living presence. He does not make assumptions about his own walk with God; he knows that all is not right and he will go to any lengths to know God.

He starts to rebuke and challenge himself (**v.5**). He tells himself off for being in despair and becoming disturbed; he tells himself to put his hope in God and states his faith that, in the end, he will be able to praise God for his presence.

He tries to lift his soul by remembering God (**v.6**) but then he recounts his experience of being swamped by what God has allowed to roll over him (**v.7**). Again he states his faith that he will find God's loving kindness in the daytime and his song in the night, "a prayer to the God of my life" (**v.8**) but then he cannot escape the intense despair of his soul in **verses 9-11**. His attempts to cheer himself up have not worked.

He feels:-

- 1) forgotten by God,
- 2) in mourning,
- 3) oppressed by the enemy,
- 4) shattering pain in his bones,
- 5) taunted by those against him,
- 6) unable to demonstrate God at work in him,
- 7) despairing and disturbed in his soul,

but still he states his determination to put his hope in God and wait for him, declaring again that he will praise God for his help! Desperate but determined!

One of the poet's biggest burdens is that he has no way of showing the reality of God to his opponents. As long as his own experience is lacking, he knows he has nothing to offer to the rest of the world. His enemies'

taunts in **verses 3, 9 & 10** just add to the torment he already feels. He cannot stand up for himself; he cannot even stand up for God because he cannot demonstrate God in the way that really counts - by his presence in his life. He is running out of hope.

He has nothing to offer, he has nowhere else to turn but to the God who is supposed to be his strength and stronghold - but who seems to have let him down and rejected him! Why does he have to go about mourning, under attack all the time? He has no case to plead in defence of the emptiness of his life. So, in **Psalm 43:1-2**, he makes his last desperate plea to God to vindicate him.

“plead my case for me, O God I have nowhere else to turn !”

. . . and light suddenly begins to dawn! The next two verses (**Ps.43:3&4**) are like the gradual appearance of a calm oasis in the centre of a harsh, parched desert.

The writer sees what God will do, wants to do, and starts to do even as he speaks the words. He sees that his desire to know the presence of God is only a reflection of God's own desire to bring him into his holy presence. All his desperation and contradictory thoughts and feelings begin to vanish in the light of the revelation which he starts to see.

It is God's light and God's truth which will be effective in leading him into a growing experience of God's presence. Truth on its own can be lifeless. It accuses us more than helps us when it taunts us with our own unreality and lack of experience. Truth with the light of the Holy Spirit becomes revelation and brings us to personal experience - it becomes living truth, what the Lord Jesus called “spirit and life”! (See **John 6:63**). The psalmist begins to see it when he reaches the point of total desperation and gives the whole thing over to God, even though he feels that God has let him down.

The poet's gasping desperation has been for the presence of God; God's light and truth lead him:-

First, to God's holy mountain, the city of God, Zion. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem; in the New, the Church, the entire body of those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. A step in the right direction, but still not fulfilling the desire of our hearts.

Second, to his house, the focus of his presence in the city. Obviously the temple in the Old Testament; perhaps in the present New Testament setting, the local fellowship of believers where we live and belong? Again, great to be part of, feeling “at home” in fellowship, but still not answering that deep longing inside. There are many spiritually unfulfilled people who are involved in living fellowships!

Third, to the altar of God, where the sacrifice pays the price to enable us to enter his presence! The Old Testament has enough record of the awesomeness of God's presence to convince us of the amazing privilege that is ours in Christ. It is revelation of what our Father has already done for us in Jesus which will bring us to a knowledge of God's real presence (See ***Ephesians 2:13, Hebrews 10:19-22, Hebrews 12:22-24*** - just a few examples!). This sort of knowledge involves every part of our soul - mind, will and emotions - as our spirit responds to the light of the Spirit of Truth himself. Sensing the presence of God in a situation is fine but we must beware of the tendency to define the reality of God's presence just by how we feel.

It is not so much that we feel his presence with us but more that we know he has brought us into his presence.

The result? Not only the joy of being brought into his presence but God himself, “the gladness of my joy” (***43:4***, literally). The writer knows he will praise God in music and song! The Holy Spirit's revelation brings healing to his soul's anguish.

Verse 5 repeats the ‘refrain’ from ***42:5 & 11***. He knows now the answer to his questions “WHY” - why indeed? “How foolish I have been - God has done it all!”

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The sons of Korah were musicians and gatekeepers in the tabernacle and temple. As musicians, they will have known what it was like to be "expected" to have full hearts and voices in praise to God, even if they felt dry and thirsty. As gatekeepers, they will have delighted in helping others into the knowledge of the presence of God.

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