

Depressed and Homesick – Psalms 42 & 43.



Introduction

In times of pressure, trouble or distress, it is often to the psalms that we turn for comfort and consolation. So I would like to begin by doing an introduction to the Biblical book of psalms (5 books actually), before looking more closely at psalms 42 & 43 (1 psalm actually) which I have given the title “Depressed and Homesick.”

What are psalms?

1. They are the Hebrew hymnbook and are called ‘Tenillim’ = ‘Songs of Praise’. The words were always set to music and were to be sung rather than said.
2. They are all poems ~ translations of Hebrew poetry. In its construction, Hebrew poetry doesn’t often have rhyme but the verses are carefully crafted to have a form of rhythm and repetition called **parallelism**. They are usually in couplets, occasionally triplets.

There is synonymous parallelism, where the same thought is expressed twice in different words

e.g. ‘Why do the nations rage..... and the peoples plot in vain?’

The kings of the earth take their stand..... and the rulers gather together’

‘Then he rebukes them in his anger...and terrifies them in his wrath (Ps. 2)

There is antithetic parallelism, where the second line contrasts with the first e.g. ‘Those who sow in tears..... will reap with songs of joy’

‘He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow...will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him’ (Ps.126)

And there is synthetic parallelism, where the second line complements or supplements the first e.g. 'O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger..... or discipline me in your wrath'

'Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint..... O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony' (Ps. 6)

It is interesting to compare the rhythm and repetition in Hebrew poetry with the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare's verse which he favours in his plays. Iambic pentameter (penta = 5 in Greek) is a rhythm structure that combines unstressed and stressed syllables in groups of 5. Each line contains 5 pairs, 10 syllables in all e.g.

Now is the win ter of our dis con tent

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

Made glor ious sum mer by this sun of York;

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

And all the clouds that lour'd u pon our house

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

In the deep bos om of the o cean buried.

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

(Richard the Third – Act 1 Scene 1).

Everything is carefully composed and the right words have to be found to maintain the rhythm. Rhythm and repetition, as well as providing momentum and flow, help us to remember what we have heard/read/sung. It's also true that poets occasionally break their own rules and introduce irregularities where the rhythm and momentum are broken.

3. Hebrew poetry (psalms) is full of similes i.e. pictures that show us how one thing resembles another

e.g. As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for God. (Ps. 42)

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. (Ps. 103)

So the psalms are to be seen, not just heard.

4. The emphasis in Hebrew poetry is not so much on the sound of the words as on the meaning of them. It is a rhythm and repetition of ideas rather than sounds. Hebrew poetry is based on truth, it describes reality. It is not fanciful or mythological. Poems describe real events and convey real truth.

It is very important to realise this because we are in the section of the Bible which is mostly poetry. Job, apart from the prologue and epilogue, is a poem which describes what really happened to Job. All of the psalms are poems. The book of proverbs is mainly poetry. Ecclesiastes is a mixture of prose and poetry. Song of Songs is all poetry and describes a real love relationship between Solomon and a woman.

So there is a lot of wise truth in this poetic section of the Bible, but it is not just confined to this section; the longer prophets all contain poetry and some of the shorter prophets are all poetry. In total, about 35% of the Old Testament is written as Hebrew poetry.

You know what is poetry in our Bibles because it is printed differently from the prose. They use indents and try to preserve the parallelism.

The first poems in the Bible are love poems in the context of our created sexuality ~ Gen. 1:27 & Gen. 2:23. How sad that today we have largely lost the sanctity, beauty and poetry of sexual relationships.

If you want a good example of the difference between Biblical prose and poetry, read Judges chapters 4 & 5. Judges 4 is prose and Judges 5 is poetry/ a psalm / a song **which describes the same events as the previous prose passage** (the victory of Deborah and Barak over Sisera). Notice, therefore, that not all psalms in the Bible are in the book of psalms!

5. Hebrew poetry covers a wide range of life events and experiences so there are many different kinds of psalms.

There are 'hallel' psalms used at Passover time (113-118). There are 'hallelu Yah' psalms which are all bookended with the phrase 'Praise the Lord' (146-150). Some psalms are pure praise.

There are acrostic poems in which each section (and every verse in that section) begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet (e.g. Psalm 119 and 145).

Psalm 136 has a refrain, 'His love endures forever', which forms the second line of every verse.

Psalms 120-134 (called 'songs of ascents') are pilgrimage songs, sung as the people walked up to Jerusalem for the 3 great annual festivals. Jerusalem is 750 metres above the Mediterranean Sea and 1142 metres above the Dead Sea so the only way to get to it is up!

Some psalms encourage us to use our bodies in praise and worship e.g. Praise him with tambourine and **dancing** (Ps. 150); **Clap your hands**, all you nations (Ps. 47); I lift up my **eyes** to you (Ps. 123); Let us **bow down** in worship, (Ps. 95:6).

Some psalms are poems of lament and repentance, some are imprecatory, calling down reprisal and judgement on foes.

Some are I/me/my psalms so are great for personal devotion e.g. psalms 23 & 63; others are We/us/our psalms for use in congregational worship when God's people are together.

The whole of life, it seems, is covered by what we read in the psalms.

Some psalms are prophetic e.g. 2, 16, 22 and 110 all have prophetic messianic aspects. Some emphasise God's power in creation e.g. psalms 8 & 19, some his work of redemption e.g. psalm 78, and some His omnipotence, His omniscience and His omnipresence e.g. psalm 139.

6. Hebrew poetry conveys intense emotional expression

e.g. joy, pain and suffering, ecstatic praise, peace, anxiety, anger, guilt, loss, fear, sadness, perplexity, love and hate.

This is probably the main reason why the psalms are so popular, because they lay bare the feelings of the writers. There is no pretence; they tell it as it is.

And it is also very much in the poetic sections of the Bible (mainly in the prophetic books) that God reveals **His** heart, how **He** is feeling about things.

Sadly, here in the West, our approach to theology has probably become too cerebral, lacking emotional awareness and intensity.

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Psalm 42 & 43 (all one psalm in the Hebrew hymnal).

In the light of what I've said so far, I have 4 suggestions to help us understand this or any other psalm.

First of all, use your imagination and senses to put yourself in the position of the writer ~ what is he seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling?

Secondly, where is the writer and what is happening. What is his life situation?

Thirdly, be aware of your own emotions as you read, recognising that they may, or may not, mirror those of the writer.

Fourthly, take time to understand what you are reading ~ reflect and meditate on the words the writer is using. Chew the words over and over again, like a cow chewing the cud!

I think one of the reasons why this psalm speaks to me, and is one of my favourites, is because I can identify temperamentally and emotionally with the (unknown) writer. I have given this psalm the title, "Depressed and Homesick" both of which states I can identify with.

Depressed and homesick



I left home when I was 17 and can remember the feeling of homesickness sweeping over me like a tsunami wave. Being essentially a 'home and hearth' person, I have always found it difficult to be away from home.

I remember the first time I went to Africa ~ I really did feel isolated and a long way from home and family, even though I was with friends!

Also, I am mainly of a melancholic disposition so it is easier for me to see the glass as being half empty rather than half full. So this psalm fits me quite well!

It is a lament written by a temple singer exiled in northern Israel, near to where the river Jordan rises in the heights of Mt. Hermon (vs. 6). The water is cascading down as he writes the words of this psalm. I've been there in Springtime when the snow on Mt. Hermon melts and comes thundering down; I can still remember the sound, "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me." (vs. 7).

Is this tumbling turmoil a picture of the writer's overwhelming homesickness and desolation?



The psalmist no longer feels in control. He is in a brooding introspective frame of mind and he is full of questions.

When will he be able to get back to Jerusalem to worship where God dwells? Where is God anyway? Others are suggesting that God has abandoned him and he is beginning to believe them. Why is he feeling so low and overwhelmed?

Incidentally, if you were given the words of this psalm, what kind of music would you compose to convey the writer's thoughts and feelings? Which instruments would you use?

In any film or play, music is key in creating atmosphere and adding to the communication of what is being seen and spoken.

In the film 'Interstellar' (where one of the themes is survival in the face of extinction), the German composer, Hans Zimmer, uses the pipe organ to highlight air/breathing/wind. Some of the music was recorded on the organ in the Temple church, London.

The Italian composer, Ludovico Einaudi, uses mainly piano and cello (and other strings) for his main themes in the recent film starring Sir Antony Hopkins and Olivia Colman called "The Father." Einaudi comments that he is depicting a cold whining wind and a low mist. Furthermore, the last piece in the film is quite transcendental in character, seemingly depicting the father's journey through life and into dementia.

I think for psalm 42 & 43 I would use the Scottish bagpipes (often used in laments) and the long whistle. These were instruments used by James Horner in some of the music for the film 'Titanic' directed by James Cameron. They have a very haunting, melancholic sound which I think would convey very well the sad longing that the psalmist is feeling here.



Actually, the psalmist himself chose the harp ~ psalm 43:4. Other psalms encourage the use of flutes, trumpets, tambourines, cymbals as well as other stringed instruments in addition to the harp.

How should we approach depression & homesickness?

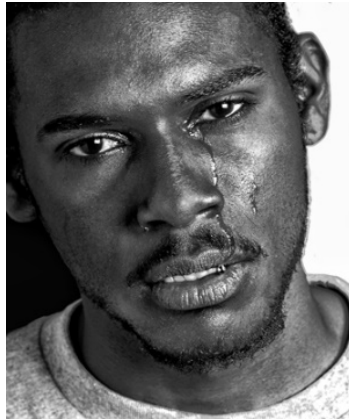
In his depressed mood and homesickness, the writer is actually doing the right things.

First of all he is asking questions of himself, 'Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? He is using his body to talk to his soul. These words could be translated, 'My, how downcast you are my soul, upset within me!' We have to begin by acknowledging and evaluating why we are feeling the way we are about our situation.

He is certainly missing home. I remember a woman saying she was sent away to boarding school when she was six years old and she used to cry every night for days, weeks and months afterwards. Like the writer of this psalm, her tears were her food 'day and night'.

Tears

When we cry (though some folks have told me they never cry) it is important to ask ourselves 'what kind of tears are they?' Are they tears of sadness, loss, grief? Are they tears of loneliness, isolation, frustration? Are they tears of relief? Are they tears of anger, remorse, self-pity? Are they tears of repentance? Are they tears of laughter, joy and thanksgiving? There are many different types of tears.



There is a Jewish custom that when someone dies, you show the bereaved family how much you care and demonstrate your sympathy, not by sending them flowers, but by collecting your tears in a specially shaped bottle and giving that to them.

Indeed the AV translation of the first part of verse 8 of psalm 56 quotes David as saying to God, “Record my lament; put my tears into your bottle...”



Sometimes we can be overcome by Godly tears. We feel sad about the things God feels sad about. Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Sometimes we laugh and make light of things that God thinks are serious. To those people Jesus says, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” (Lk. 6:21-25)

One of the greatest pastoral gifts is to be able to rejoice with those who are rejoicing, and to weep with those who are weeping.

And one last thing about crying: It is much better to cry with someone than to cry alone. Crying alone can just reinforce your sense of loneliness and isolation. Better to share your tears with others.

Why?

Back to the writer: He was asking himself questions, talking to himself, trying to evaluate why he was feeling the way he was.

And sometimes we also need to talk to others. Talking therapy, with the right person, or people in a group, can be very helpful. I like this verse from Malachi 3:16, “Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard.” It is often as we talk and share with others that the Lord joins us.

When we are depressed and homesick it is good to begin by asking **ourselves** the right questions, then we may wish to discuss our situation **with others** and then it is good to bring our questions **to God** in interrogatory prayer. I would recommend that you practise asking God questions and then listen for His replies.

I once asked God why I was feeling depressed and disappointed and He said to me, “It’s because you have put your hope in other people; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

In Christian circles, we tend to be quite strong on intercessory prayer but weak on interrogatory prayer, whereas all the great men and women of faith in the Bible were strong on asking God questions.

Take Habakkuk, for example. He said to God, “How long, O Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen? Why do you make me look at injustice, emptiness, boredom? Why do you tolerate wrong?”

When we ask God questions like this, it gives God an opportunity to speak, so we then have to be in listening mode!

Also, be aware that when you start to ask God questions, he will start to ask you questions! Job had lots of questions for God about why he suffered the way he did and then finally God said to Job, “Job, brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.” And God’s questions all started with, “Where were you? Have you? Can you? Do you?”

Remember also that when we ask God questions, we will always get a **reply**, but we won’t always get the **result** we want. As the apostle Paul discovered when, on 3 occasions, he asked God to take away his affliction but didn’t get the **result** he wanted. His affliction continued. But he got a **reply**, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

Another good thing the writer of this psalm was doing, as well as asking questions, was to remember the good times from the past. “I remember how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.” (42:4)

Past, Present, Future

Do you remember the good old days? I’m not sure when they were but some folks talk about them! There is a therapy called ‘Reminiscence therapy’ which helps older people especially, to remember the past positive times in their lives.

Philip Zimbardo, an American social psychologist, has done a lot of work on this. Focusing on past positive events in our lives gives us roots and identity and enables us to be grounded.

What we don’t want to do is focus on past negative experiences; too much nostalgic introspection is bad for us. Indeed, the word nostalgia comes from two words meaning the ‘return of pain’ (nostos = return; algia from algos = pain). Yes, it is important to acknowledge the past and its impact upon us, but not to dwell on past negative events in our lives.

We also need to focus on all the good things we have in our lives now. This present focus gives us the energy we need to go on exploring people, places, ideas, our own needs etc.

And notice too how the psalmist is introducing the future, “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.” He repeats this refrain three times in his psalm.

It is so important to be future oriented where we are anticipating good outcomes and consequences. This future anticipation gives us wings to soar to new destinations and challenges. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him; but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.” (1 Cor.2:9&10)

It is those people who can move easily from past positive experiences to present enjoyable experiences and then anticipate future amazing experiences who are the most psychologically and spiritually healthy.

Recently, I was talking to a guy who must have been in his 70’s and he was telling me how, before he dies, he wants to go to Borneo to see the orangutans and to Madagascar to see the ringed-tail lemurs!

Hope in the lament

Although the writer of psalm 42 & 43 is in a difficult and unpleasant place, we can still pick out words he uses that shine like stars against the dark sky: ‘hope’, ‘praise’, ‘love’, ‘truth’, ‘joy’, ‘delight’ ~ these words also form part of his lament.

Indeed, it is **because** his soul is downcast within him that he is making a determined effort to come to God and remember God, “My soul is downcast within me; **therefore** I will remember you.” (vs.6). It is our lament which gives us the courage to return home to God.

God’s presence is surely the best antidote to depression and homesickness.

We have, in our Church building, a huge mosaic made by John Piper. It depicts Jesus appearing to two of his disciples on the Emmaus Road. The first thing I always notice about it is the dark, almost black, background which is the main colour used.

These two disciples were dejected, depressed, desperate, ‘we had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one who was going to redeem Israel’, they said. They then asked Jesus a question, ‘Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there in these days?’

And, true to form, Jesus then asks them a question, ‘What things?’

It is out of the darkness that God delights to reveal himself to us. To all those who walk in darkness, Jesus will eventually reveal himself as the light of the world, and our hearts will burn within us as he opens to us the Scriptures.

Finally, I want to answer the persistent question that we may ask ourselves, others may ask us and our enemy will certainly ask us, and that is, “Where is your God?” (vs. 3 & 10).

Where is Your God?

It’s an important question to ask. Recently I gave a copy of John Lennox’s booklet, “Where is God in a Coronavirus World?” to one of our neighbours. Is God currently quarantined? Is He self-isolating?

However, using the whole of Scripture, I find that God gives us 5 answers to the question of where He is in relation to his people, which we are to believe and accept by faith: -

1. He is in front of us leading us. “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.” (Ex. 13:21)

“He [Jesus] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him.” (Jn. 10:3&4)

2. God, or one of his angels, is behind us shielding us. “Then the angel of God, who had been travelling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel.” (Ex. 14:19&20)
3. He is underneath us supporting us. “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” (Ex. 19:4)

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a young eaglet and you have never flown before! There you are, high up in some tree or on top of some cliff face and you are looking over the edge of the nest thinking, “This looks a bit frightening!”

What the mother eagle will then do is to stir up the nest and nudge the youngster over the side! The youngster then has to flap furiously as it falls down. And then, the mother will swoop down under the fledgling, catch the struggling offspring on its wings, and return it to the nest.



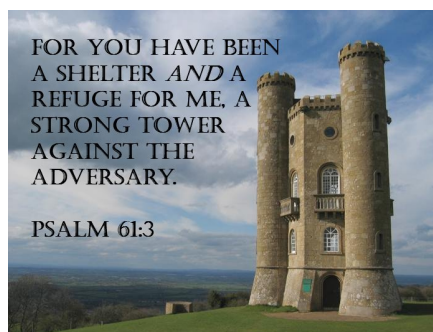
The whole process repeats until the eaglet has developed sufficient strength and skill to get back to the nest on its own.

This is a picture of what God does with us – he is underneath us supporting us, “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them, and carries them on its pinions.” (Deut. 32:11)

And in the N.T., “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” (Jude verse 24)

Where is your God? He is in front of us leading us, behind us shielding us, underneath us supporting us and

4. He is above us watching over us, night and day, every day. “He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber – the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.” (Ps. 121)
5. He is around us, protecting us. “He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge.” (Ps. 44:2). “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.” (Prov. 18:10)



6. He has made his home within us. Father, Son and Holy Spirit now dwell in us. “Jesus said, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.’” (John 14:23) And, speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said to his disciples, ‘You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.’ (John 14:17)

So when we wonder where God is, or when others say to us ‘Where is your God?’ we reply, “He is in front of us leading us, behind us shielding us, underneath us supporting us, above us watching over us, around us protecting us and he lives in us. How marvellous is that - Amen!

George Irving – Sept. 2021