



Psalm 42 - Longing for God and His Help in Distress

To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.

Introduction to Psalms 42-43

While each of these psalms can be taken separately, Psalms 42-43 go well together as a song with three stanzas: they share a refrain (42:5, 42:11 and 43:5); 43:2 is almost the same as 42:9; and they both express the longing to return to God's presence in the sanctuary (42:2 and 43:3-4).

In these psalms the singer laments his circumstances, connected with enemies who despise God and oppress his faithful servants, which keep him from attending worship at the central sanctuary. Singing this in corporate worship would especially foster a sense of yearning and expectation in the faithful, so that they would learn to attend worship looking for God's presence, to mourn any circumstances that prevent them from attendance, and to count their attendance at worship as a great gift from God, certainly not a burdensome duty! Other psalms that express yearning for God include Psalms 63 and 84.

The Korahites were Levites from the family of Kohath and were descended from Korah. By David's time it seems they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19). Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses during the wilderness days of the Exodus (Numbers Chapter 16). God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died, but the sons of Korah remained. Perhaps they were so grateful for this mercy that they became notable in Israel for praising God.

Psalm 42:1-5 - My Soul Pants for God.

The song begins with a poignant expression of longing for God himself, using the image of thirst: <<*as a deer longs for flowing streams*>>. For the pious, the

answer to this longing comes in public worship; this is clear from the phrase <<*behold the face of God*>>, i.e. at the sanctuary, as seen in the command: <<*Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God*>> (Exodus 23:17), and from the theme of v.4, which recollects the former participation in sanctuary worship. The singer represents himself as separated from this worship and subject to taunts from those who despise his faith. The singer closes the stanza by encouraging himself that God will return him to worship.

- 1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
- 3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

Psalm 42:1-3

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. The Korahites began this psalm with a powerful image, a deer aching with thirst. Perhaps the thirst came from drought or from heated pursuit; either way, the deer longed for and needed water. In the same way, the psalmist's soul longed for and needed God. This is a theme that occurs with others: <<*My heart faints within me!*>> (Job 19:27b), <<*With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments*>> (Psalm 119:131), and: <<*Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness*>> (Joel 1:20 NIV).

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. The psalmist was not thirsty for water, but for God. Drinking and thirst are common pictures of man's spiritual need and God's supply: <<*for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water*>> (Jeremiah 2:13), <<*Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'*>> (John 4:10), and: <<*On the last day of the festival, the great day,*

while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified>> (John 7:37-39). Here, the emphasis is on the desperation of the need. One may go many days without food, but thirsts shows an even more urgent need.

He is the living God in at least three senses:

- He alone has life in himself and of himself.
- He alone gives life.
- He is distinct from the dead, imagined gods of the heathen.

Scripture frequently refers to the living God, for example: <<Joshua said, ‘By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites>> (Joshua 3:10), <<For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!’ But there was no one among all the people who answered him>> (1 Samuel 14:39), <<Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God>> (Isaiah 37:17), <<Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God’>> (Matthew 16:16), and: <<For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe>> (1 Timothy 4:10).

When shall I come and behold the face of God? For the Korahites, connected to the tabernacle and the temple and their rituals, there was an appointed place to appear before God. This was a longing to connect again with God and his people at the tabernacle or temple.

My tears have been my food day and night. These tears can perhaps be understood in at least two ways. First, they demonstrated the grief that made the psalmist long for relief in God. Second, they showed the psalmist’s grief over the perceived distance from God. Either or both of these could be case; yet the need was plainly deep and great.

While people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ Making the problem worse was being in the company of those who wanted to discourage the psalmist: <<Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’>> (Psalm 115:2). They wanted to make him feel that at his moment of need, God was nowhere to be found. David might rather have said to them, “Where are your eyes? Where is your sight? For God is not only in heaven, but in me.” God is there to be found in all his glory: <<Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, ‘Where is the Lord your God?’>> (Micah 7:10a).

‘Where is your God?’ is a question that many ask today when natural disasters or acts of terror cause great loss of life. They fail to understand that it is not the role of God to stop such events from occurring. He wants people to come to him in faith. Sometimes he will protect his people, at others he will stand with them in adversity, and at others he will receive their souls.

4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

Psalm 42:4

I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God. The remembering of happier times made the psalmist sadder. He thought of the times of joyful worship at the house of God and felt so distant from those better days: <<*But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away*>> (Ezra 3:12-13), and: <<*I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’*>> (Psalm 122:1).

A multitude keeping festival. He especially remembered the high times of the holidays that marked the Jewish calendar. He thought of the multitude and excitement, i.e. with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving that marked the festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ^{6a} and my God.

Psalm 42:5-6a

Why are you cast down, O my soul. The psalmist paused from the painful memory to challenge his own soul: <<*My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me*>> (Lamentations 3:20). He did not surrender to his feelings of spiritual

depression and discouragement. Instead, he challenged them and brought them before God. He said to those cast down and disquieted feelings, “Hope in God. He will come through again, because he has before.” This is a long way from the surrender that often traps the discouraged or spiritually depressed person. He did not say, “My soul is cast down and that’s how it is. There is nothing I can do about it.” The challenge made to his own soul, demanding that it explain a reason why it should be so cast down, is a wonderful example, as was that of Jesus in Gethsemane as the hour of his death approached: <<***Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me’***>> (Matthew 26:38). There were some valid reasons for discouragement; there were many more reasons for hope and joy.

It also was not as if he had not already given many reasons for his discouragement. Many things bothered him:

- The distance from home and the house of God (v.2 and v.6).
- The taunting unbelievers (v.3 and v.10).
- Memories of better days (v.4).
- The present absence of past spiritual thrills (v.4).
- The overwhelming trials of life (v.7).
- God’s seemingly slow response (v.9).

Still, it was as if the psalmist said, “Those are good enough reasons to be cast down when I think of the greatness of God and the help of his favour and presence.”

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him. In his discouragement, the psalmist spoke to himself, perhaps even preached to himself: <<***My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer because I am greatly disturbed***>> (Job 20:2 NIV). He did not feel filled with praise at that moment. Yet he was confident that as he did what he could to direct his hope in God that praise would come forth. “I do not feel like praising him now, but he is worthy of my hope, and I shall again praise him.”

My help and my God. The psalmist knew to look for help in God’s countenance, that is, the approving face of God. He found a better place by challenging his sense of gloom and seeking after God’s face. In seeking God’s help the psalmist understood that the answers were not within himself, but in the living God. He did not look within; he looked upwards. Observe that the first words of v.6 and my God belong with the refrain.

Psalm 42:6b-11 - Has God Forgotten Me?

The second stanza sharpens the description of the singer’s situation. He is in the land of Jordan and of Hermon, and near the otherwise unknown Mount Mizar; this would probably locate him north of the Sea of Galilee at the source of the Jordan

River; but at any rate he is far from Jerusalem, where the sanctuary is. He knows that God is not literally absent, but he also feels that the sanctuary is where he meets God most fully; hence his separation has left his soul cast down within him (v.6), because he wonders why God has forgotten him (v.9). This stanza ends, like the first, with self-encouragement.

6b My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

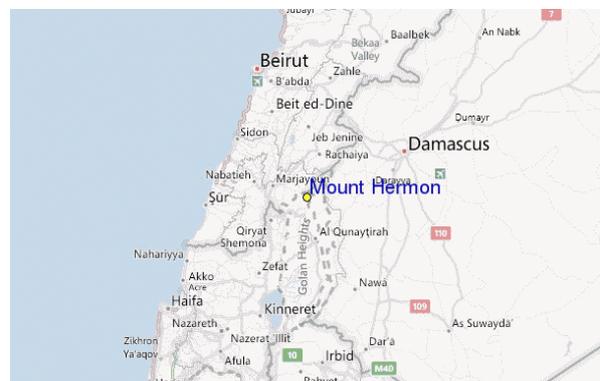
Psalm 42:6b

My soul is cast down within me. In an almost detached sense, the psalmist reported his cast down soul to God. This was wise, because a common tendency in such times is to stay away from God or act as if the problem could be hidden from him. The psalmist did neither.

The mood of the psalmist in v.6 is repeated in the next psalm also: <<Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God>> (Psalm 43:5).

Therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan. This explains why he was so far from the house of God and could not appear at the tabernacle or temple. He was far north of Jerusalem, in the heights of Mount Hermon.

From Mount Mizar. Mizar is probably the name of a hill otherwise unknown, and specifies the singer's locality more minutely to those alive in that era.



Location of Mount Hermon

7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

8 By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

Psalm 42:7-8

Verse 7 uses two images of unruly water, perhaps to contrast with the ‘flowing streams’ of v.1: the first, the thunder of your cataracts, portrays two waterfalls plunging into a valley, calling to one another with a roar, while the second, all your waves and your billows have gone over me, portrays the raging sea in which one might drown. The prophet quotes this verse as he sinks into the Mediterranean Sea: <<*You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me*>> (Jonah 2:3).

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love. The covenant name of God, the Lord, Hebrew *Yahweh*, is somewhat rarely used in this second book of the Psalms. Here it is used with special strength, with great confidence that God will command his steadfast love to be extended to the despairing one.

And at night his song is with me. The psalmist came to a place of greater confidence, secure in God’s goodness to him by day or at night. In the more frightening night, he would have the gracious comfort of his song to be with him.

A prayer to the God of my life. This is another statement of confidence. The song from God will be a prayer, but not unto the God of his death, but to the God of my life. God is both the purpose of the psalmist’s life and the giver of it: <<*So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun*>> (Ecclesiastes 8:15).

- ⁹ I say to God, my rock,
‘Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?’
- ¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’

Psalm 42:9-10

I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’ There is a pleasant contradiction in this line. The psalmist had the confidence to call God his rock, his place of security, stability, and strength: <<*You shall have a song as in the night when a holy festival is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to*

the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel>> (Isaiah 30:29). At the same time he could honestly bring his feelings to God and ask, “Why have you forgotten me?” The more experienced saint knows there is no contradiction. It was because he regarded God as his rock that he could pour out his soul before him so honestly.

Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? The psalmist senses God sustaining him, but his battle is not over. There is the constant oppression of the enemy. The taunt, ‘Where is your God?’ continued from them.

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Psalm 42:11

Why are you cast down, O my soul? As the oppression of the enemy continued, so the psalmist would continue to speak to himself and challenge his own sense of discouragement.

Hope in God. The pleasant words of v.5 are repeated as both important and helpful, and they still apply: <<*I have a hope in God – a hope that they themselves also accept – that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous*>> (Acts 24:15). The psalmist, and everyone buried under discouragement, needed to keep hope in God and keep confidence that they shall again praise him.