

Psalm 42 | Psalm 43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 42 To the Choir Master, a mascal of the sons of Korah As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, 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 the day long, Where is your God? These things I remember, as I pour out my soul, How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember you, From the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep, at the roar of your waterfalls. All your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is within me.

[1 : 08] A prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, While they say to me all the day long, where is your God?

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

Psalm 43 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people. From the deceitful and unjust man deliver me. For you are the God in whom I take refuge.

Why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, And I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Why are you cast down, O my soul?

[2 : 14] And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. The 42nd Psalm begins the second book of the Psalter.

The Psalter is divided into five different books. Psalms 1 to 41 are the first. 42 to 72 the second. 73 to 89 the third.

90 to 106 the fourth. And 107 to 150 the fifth. As a book, the Psalter gives indications of its being a collection of previous Psalm collections that likely circulated independently.

One thing pointing towards this is the near repetition of certain Psalms or parts of Psalms in two books. Psalm 53 in book 2 is almost identical to Psalm 14 in book 1.

Psalm 70 largely repeats the conclusion of Psalm 40. While the divisions between sections are not that sharply defined, and relations between adjacent material can often be quite loose, one can notice some thematic and other structuring of the wider body of the Psalms.

[3 : 20] For instance, there are book-ending Psalms. The first two Psalms introduced the entire collection. The first is a Psalm concerned with the law, and the second as a royal Psalm. The second book closes with another royal Psalm, Psalm 72, as does the third, Psalm 89.

There are both broader clusters of Psalms and various smaller clusters and pairings, such as the pair of Psalms 111 and 112. Save for Psalms 86 and 89, for example, the entirety of the third book of the Psalms consists of Psalms of Asaph and the sons of Korah.

Books 4 and 5, with which the Psalter concludes, are overwhelmingly praise and thanksgiving Psalms. The fifth book is largely Hallelujah Psalms, Songs of Ascent, with a series of Psalms of David in Psalm 138-145.

Psalm 150 concludes the entire Psalter on a doxological note, much as Psalm 1 frames it by way of the righteous and the wicked, and the righteous man's meditation upon the law of God.

Psalms can be ordered thematically and also share certain stylistic features. For instance, books 1 and 2 of the Psalms are largely composed of Psalms of individual complaint, whereas book 3 is mostly composed of Psalms of communal complaint.

[4 : 40] Stylistically, the second book of the Psalms shows a preference for God over Yahweh or Lord. Conrad Schaefer notes that the uneven style of some of the Psalms raises the possibility that they were fusions of two or more separate Psalms.

He gives Psalms 19 and 27 as possible examples. Psalm 70 seems to excerpt the conclusion of Psalm 40, making it a psalm in its own right. There are various Psalms that are divided differently in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament from the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC.

This leads, for instance, to divergences in numbering at various points. Others have suggested that some Psalms are divisions of a single Psalm into one. Psalms 42 and 43 are an example of Psalms about which this claim has been made.

Schaefer observes that these Psalms share a liturgical character and a major and a minor refrain.

The major refrain is repeated in verses 5 and 11 of Psalm 42 and in verse 5 of Psalm 43.

The minor refrain is found in verse 9 of Psalm 42 and verse 2 of Psalm 43.

[5 : 57] Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? In some manuscript editions, these two Psalms are a single Psalm. Various modern commentators across the theological spectrum argue that they should be regarded as a single Psalm that was subsequently divided.

For instance, Alan Ross, Craig Broyles, Arthur Weiser, Marvin Tate and Peter Craigie, Tremple Longman, Derek Kidner, Gordon Wenham and James Mays. There are a few dissenters. Nancy de Classe Walford argues that they are significantly different from each other in a way that justifies their being treated separately. One, for instance, addresses the soul while the other addresses the Lord.

Whether or not we should regard these Psalms as a single Psalm that was divided at some later point, a position I find more persuasive, they are clearly paired, the connection between them strengthened further by the absence of a superscription for Psalm 43.

Psalm 42 begins with the evocative imagery of a panting deer longing for refreshing water. William Brown unpacks the imagery here, commenting upon the image of the deer as one of a vulnerable and dependent creature hunted by its enemies.

[7 : 08] The stooped head of the deer corresponds with the downcast soul of the Psalmist. The water is God himself, flowing streams like the living God. God is the source of refreshment, of strength and of life.

The desire for God's presence and blessing is as essential for the life of the Psalmist as a creature's need for life-giving water. The flowing streams here are associated with the temple and its throngs.

Huge streams of worshippers ascend and descend from the house of God like great watercourses, yet the Psalmist finds himself weak prey in a thirsty land, longing to be back in Jerusalem, a place well watered with God's presence and blessing.

The temple had a bronze sea and water chariots flowing out, playing upon this water imagery. The Psalmist was once a leader of the multitude in worship, but now he is surrounded by predators, mocking him, declaring that his God is nowhere to be found.

The water imagery extends beyond the comparison of the flowing streams with God. The Psalmist thirsts, but he has to subsist on his own tears. His own soul is like water, which he pours out in tears and in prayers before God.

[8 : 19] The Psalmist began by describing his trouble as the experience of his soul. Such descriptions of the soul can be found on many occasions in the Psalms. The soul, here compared to a parched deer in a land of drought, a vulnerable and dependent animal, characterises the Psalmist's experience of himself as a limited and weak creature.

This dimension of his existence is taken seriously, but it is also addressed from a different internal vantage point. In the great refrain that is repeated in verses 5 and 11, and in verse 5 of the following Psalm, the Psalmist speaks to his own soul.

He addresses himself as if that creature he described in verse 1. Speaking to his soul from the position of his confidence in God's truth, goodness and promise, he encourages his downcast soul to look up, turning with confidence towards God and putting its hope in him.

He will bring the soul's salvation. The second stanza returns to the experience of the soul. The Psalmist is in a remote location in northern Israel, near the headwaters of the Jordan River, near Mount Hermon.

He's remembering God from that place. The water imagery now reappears, albeit in a different form. The region he is in is one of waterfalls, roaring waters above and roaring waters below.

[9 : 36] But these are threatening, dangerous waters that might overwhelm him. He describes breakers and waves going over him, perhaps referring to the waters of a tempestuous sea, or perhaps still referring to the torrents and cataracts of the waters descending from the mountain heights, booming, seething, and cascading in the pools and the channels beneath.

He is submerged beneath terrifying and tumultuous depths, and he sees no way out. He is longing for the refreshing and gentle waters of God's presence, but God has sent him these waters instead. Even in this situation, however, he continues to know something of the Lord's steadfast love, even if only in the dogged confidence of his faith, which can recognize the sun of God's goodness, even when it is hidden by the darkest of clouds.

This is the only reference to the name of the Lord, God's covenant name, in the Psalm, a detail that is likely of some significance. The knowledge that he has produces an answering song within him. He returns in it to his lament, a lament expressed with the confidence of faith in a God who hears such distress. It seems that God has forgotten him, not coming to his aid.

[10 : 45] This is made so much crueler by the fact that his adversaries are mocking him, claiming that God has utterly abandoned him. As if the gasp of a man trying to escape drowning, the psalmist breaks the surface of the abyss with the deep breath of the returning refrain, Why are you cast down, O my soul?

And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. In Psalm 43, we move from the lament of Psalm 42 to a prayer to God for vindication. Against the backdrop of the beleaguered position that he described in Psalm 42, the psalmist calls upon God to vindicate him and to act on his behalf against his enemies. He has taken refuge in God, yet it feels as though God has rejected him.

Placing his situation before God in prayer, however, pouring out his soul, he confidently seeks the Lord's light and truth in his darkness. They will lead him back to God's holy hill, where he will return with great joy, with sacrifice and with song.

The psalm ends with the repeated refrain once more. However, nothing is ever repeated exactly, and one of the purposes of the repetition is to encourage the singer or the hearer of the psalm to hear that refrain differently on the third repetition than they did on the first two.

[12 : 05] Earlier, in Psalm 42, the words of the refrain were like the dogged gasp for air of a man struggling in the deep. Now, however, the words are like the settled breaths of a man confident in the Lord's deliverance.

The encouraging voice of faith that the psalmist addresses to his beleaguered soul is now stronger than his existential turmoil and fear. A question to consider.

How can we learn from the example of the psalmist in our efforts to address God's assuring truths to our troubled and frightened souls?