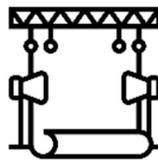


Longing to be in the presence of God - A Devotion about Psalm 42



How to use this devotion

Welcome to this Devotion. We trust it will be a blessing to you. We used a bite of paper to explain the context of the Psalm. This will allow us to step into the shoes of the writers of this Psalm for a moment, and then to personalise those events. Once the context is better understood it allows space for one to fill in the blanks with one's own experience. Let us get going. Quotations this time are from the Amplified Bible.



Backdrop

This is a rather lengthy backdrop. It could have been even longer, but we will stick to the background information necessary for us to be able to understand the context of this Psalm.

Who wrote the Psalms?

David is known for writing most of the Psalms. But there were other authors as well. The descendants of the Korahites wrote 25 in total, Psalm 42 is one of those written by the sons of Korah as well as 10 other Psalms. Solomon wrote one, Moses wrote one, and 50 of the psalms have unknown authors. David wrote 73 Psalms and maybe another handful of those 50 of whom the authors are not that clear.

Who were the Korahites?

Historians point us to the fact that it was most probably descendants of Korah and not his immediate sons. But who was Korah? We encounter 3 people with this name in the Bible. According to historians those descendants of Korah that wrote the Psalms most probably were from the third so person that we encounter in the Bible. We read about him in Numbers 16 where we learn that he was the son of Izhar who, was the son of Konath, who was the son of Levi, and he, therefore, was a Levite. It makes sense therefore that the descendants of Korah who wrote the Psalms were from the Levitical tribe that was responsible for duties in the Tabernacle and later the Temple.

The Korah Rebellion

This is one of those favorite Old Testament topics for a sermon. One can read the whole story in Numbers 16. Korah challenged Moses for the priestly duties. Korah as well Dathan and Abiram who were from the Reubenite tribe, as well as 250 of the community leaders revolted against Moses. They were very unhappy about the fact that their responsibilities were confined to the lesser duties around the tabernacle. They challenged Moses for some of the priestly duties, especially burning incense. Moses was not taking any of it and after consulting God he challenged the rebels to return the next day. Everyone of those 250 leaders had to turn up with his own firepan. Moses knew what was coming but not Korah

who likely anticipated in-service trying for the 250 men, seeing that they all had to come ready with a firepan. Instead, the anger of God consumed them. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their families were swallowed by the earth, possibly a sinkhole. The remainder of their 250 followers were consumed by a fire from heaven and only their firepans survived. These firepans were collected and beaten by the priest into sheets with which they covered the ark, as a stark reminder to the Israelites! One can only imagine the utter disbelief, shock, and fear on the faces of the Israelites witnessing the event. It is a good script for a movie.

But even that was not enough of a lesson and soon after that, the Israelites revolted against Moses again. Can one believe it! Moses consulted God and once again the anger of God come down on the people. This time in the form of a plaque that appeared overnight and killed 14700 people. There is much more interesting detail to this story, for instance how Moses prevented God's total wrath, but what is important for our devotion is to know that despite Korah's rebellion, Korah's lineage continues according to Numbers 26:11. Some of his relatives must have been spared the wrath of God, and we encounter them in the Psalms again.

Korah's Lineage

In the book of Psalms, we encounter apart from the unnamed descendants of Korah, for Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. Heman was the author of Psalm 88, Asaph was the author of 12 Psalms and Ethan wrote Psalm 89. Psalm 42 the subject of our devotion is one of these 11 Psalms written by unnamed Korahites. The background of Heman, Asaph, and Ethan helps us to understand to role of these Korahites. So let us therefore briefly look at the lives of Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. This will help us to better understand Psalm 42.



The Musicians in the House of the Lord that authored Psalms

"They ministered with song in front of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting until Solomon built the LORD's temple in Jerusalem, and they performed their task according to the regulations given to them". - 1 Chronicles 6: 32

Heman

The book of 1 Chronicles gives us more background about the lineages, duties, and skills of the musicians responsible for the tabernacle and later the temple. In Chapter 6 we read more about Heman the author of Psalm 88. He was one of those musicians assigned by David for duties at the tabernacle. It is interesting that we found here a detailed genealogy of Heman. It covers more than 20 generations, and the Levitical lineage can be clearly seen. In Chapter 15 we read in more detail about his specific duties. He Asaph, and Ethan, were responsible for sounding the cymbals made of bronze. In Chapter 25 David assign also Heman's sons for service. It was their responsibility to prophesy unto the Lord using harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals.

Asaph

We do not find a detailed lineage of Asaph apart from the fact that his father was Berechiah, a doorkeeper at the tabernacle (1 Chron 15:17). Asaph was the chief of the musicians appointed by David and was responsible for playing the cymbals of bronze (1 Chron 16:5). Asaph and the other musicians were responsible to minister before the ark daily (1 Chron 16:37). His duties also required him to be part of the glorious procession that accomplished the ark on its journey to Jerusalem (1 Chron 15:19). One can assume that Asaph was not only a good leader but also a skilled musician. Playing the cymbals required someone that could set the rhythm and pace for the other musicians, and that against the background of an incredible noisy procession. For that one needed to have very strong arms, good sandals for walking and a lot of endurance! Against this backdrop, one can understand why Asaph was to be the author of 12 of the Psalms.

Ethan

We do not know much about Ethan from the book of 1 Chronicles. He was the son of Kushaiah of whom we do not know much either (1 Chron 15:17). Together with Asaph and Heman, he was responsible for playing the cymbals (1 Chron 15:19). Ethan was the author of the rather lengthy Psalm 89 where one learns a bit more about him. He, Asaph, and Heman must have made a formidable team as their names are mentioned in the same breath. One can imagine that they were good friends and must have spent a lot of time together practicing their musical skills. It is therefore fitting that between them they authored 14 of the Psalms. This brings us now to the topic of our devotion, Psalm 42. Let's jump into it.



Psalm 42

The authors of Psalm 42 are not known by name. It could have been either of these 3 men or other unknown descendants of Korah. The available facts support the view that it was written by unknown Korahites. Some historians are of the opinion that this Psalm was written by David but there is more doubt about this than any certainty. For our devotion, we assume that it was written by one or more of the Korahites, and therefore musicians tasked by King David for duties at the tabernacle and later the temple.

Intro

To the Chief Musician. A skillful song, *or* a didactic *or* reflective poem, of the sons of Korah.

Some translations use the word Maskil (Mashcil) for explaining the format of the Psalm. It is accepted that it is a song or poem which was accompanied by a tune that could have indicated the instruments which were used in singing it. Seeing that the Korahites were skilled musicians of brass instruments, trumpets, and tambourines this Psalm when sung most likely was very noisy, or as a poem accompanied with as much noise.



Verse 1-4

The songwriters provide the background here for the reason for writing the Psalm. They were longing to be in the presence of God, while not being able to do so.

¹ As the deer pants [longingly] for the water brooks, So my soul pants [longingly] for You, O God. ² My soul (my life, my inner self) thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see the face of God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ⁴ These things I [vividly] remember as I pour out my soul; How I used to go along before the great crowd of people and lead them in procession to the house of God [like a choirleader before his singers, timing the steps to the music and the chant of the song], With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a great crowd keeping a festival.

Reflection

Verse one and two are the subject of many songs and choruses written over many years in many languages. It made this Psalm famous! The songwriters missed being in the presence of God so much, they compared it to a very thirsty deer desperately seeking water. They were crying their days and nights away so much so that their tears become the food for their souls. There were recalling the processions on their way to the house of God, the Tabernacle, and the unspeakable joy that accompanied the procession. The songwriters do not go into the reasons for not being able to do so anymore but they sure missed it!

Questions for Reflection

Was there a time when you longed for the presence of the Lord like a thirsty deer after water? When was that? Where was that? Are you longing for it now? Can you recall a time or times where you, with others, enjoyed the presence of the Lord so much it made you cry for not being able to do so anymore?



Verse 5-6

The songwriters continued the song with a question to their inner self which was in turmoil, and without hesitation provide a clue for the way to getting to smoother waters. One can almost hear them cautioning themselves.

⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become restless *and* disturbed within me? Hope in God *and* wait expectantly for Him, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence. ⁶ O my God, my soul is in despair within me [the burden more than I can bear]; Therefore I will [fervently] remember You from the land of the Jordan And the

peaks of [Mount] Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the [thundering] sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.

Reflection

Their souls (inner spirit) are in despair, restless, and disturbed. They struggle to bear it. One can sense the lack of hope, peace, and calmness of spirit. They recall those places where they experience the presence of God, at the Jordan River, and near the peaks of Mount Hermon, the highest peak in their native land, filled with snow and the source of raging streams of water. They recall the noisy and turbulent waterfalls coming from there so intensely, as if it was washing over them. But in the same breath, they cautioned themselves to have patience and to wait on God.

Questions for Personal Reflection

Can you recall a time when your soul was in despair, restless, and disturbed? Were there times when it felt like water rushing over you? Can you recall those times? Do you find it difficult to wait patiently on God?



Verse 8-10

The songwriters thankfully are not overcome by their despair. A glimmer of hope in their God starts to surface, but it is not without a question or two to the God of their lives. One senses a bit of impatience.

⁸ Yet the LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song will be with me, A prayer to the God of my life. ⁹ I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" ¹⁰ As a crushing of my bones [with a sword], my adversaries taunt me, While they say continually to me, "Where is your God?"

Reflection

The songwriters knew that the lovingkindness of their God will again fill their days and a song of prayer their nights. But for now, they carry the burden of being devoid of being in the presence of God. Their adversaries added to this burden so much that it feels as if their bones are being crushed by a sword. They had no easy way out, or rather into the presence of God. Again, the reasons for it are not clear. Maybe they were on a journey somewhere, maybe they were in captivity, or maybe they were ostracised by their own people.

Questions for Personal Reflection

Have you lately felt forsaken by God? Have you perhaps asked Him why He has forsaken you? Did you get any answers to your question? Are you in despair?



Verse 11

11 Why are you in despair, O my soul? Why have you become restless *and* disquieted within me? Hope in God *and* wait expectantly for Him, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

Reflection

This short Psalm ends with the same question it started with. The writers questioned their own soul (spirit) that had become so restless. They reminded themselves that there will come a time that they will be able to praise Him again.

Final Take

Reading the Psalm, or song, one almost senses the rhythm that hovers between the high and fast notes of a chorus and the slow and low notes of the verse of a song. Not being able to be in the presence of God gives background to the verses and their expressed hope in their God completing the choruses.

The tabernacle, the ark, and the temple were the places where they worshipped and celebrated His existence, proximity, and loving-kindness. For reasons unknown, the songwriters are not being able to be with others worshipping the God of their life. They bore the immense weight of being devoid of this experience. One can only imagine that weight.

Nevertheless, they knew that there would come a time when they will be able to be at a place where they will experience the presence of God again, and with others. Where they will be able to bang away at those bronze cymbals with their muscles gleaming with sweat in the hot sun while marching through the dirt. What a way to express their joy! They must have surely missed it!

Personal Take

We are very fortunate that we do not have to journey to a tabernacle or temple to experience the presence of God and to be able to encounter Him. God through his Spirit is present with us every day and night. But, like the songwriters, we go through difficult times where we feel devoid of God's presence. In fact, that happens often, it is normal, and we do not have to feel bad that it happens. We were made to have fellowship with God and for whatever reason, if we can't, our spirits like those of the songwriters get very troubled nevertheless, and that is a good sign. This devotion is not about how to get "back into" the presence of God. This devotion reminds us that it does happen and that we can and most probably will get to that place, and that there is hope that we can, and always will return to the place where one can experience God's presence again.

I want to encourage you to get back to that place as soon as possible if you are not there now. If you can not do it alone ask others to help you, and to pray for you but don't leave it as it is. God is faithful and when we call on His name, like the songwriters, He will help us and allow us to get back to a place where we can bang away at our own cymbals, whatever that might be. Grab hold of your cymbal and as you once again enter in God's presence make sure that He cannot but hear and see your joy!

Thank you for journeying with us through this devotion.



Something More About Cymbals

Cymbals used during Biblical times were very different from those that are used today. That is understandable when comparing the difference in technologies available during those times, and today. Cymbals played by hand today are called crash cymbals, very appropriate for what they are doing. There is also a range of other cymbals found in orchestras called splash-, chinas-, bells, high-hats etcetera played with wooden sticks. Each has its unique function and sound. These kinds of cymbals originated much later as the technology to refine, flatten and shape various metals became available.

Those years all instruments were made by hand. First the metal, in this case, bronze, had to be melted into chunks, then forged by hand into a certain shape, and then finished by hand until its final shape. This was dirty, hard, and labor-intensive work. Compared to today's cymbals those used by people like the Korahites were smaller in diameter but with a larger thickness and therefore most likely heavier. There were two basic types of cymbals uncovered during excavations by archaeologists. The smaller ones range from 3 to 6 cm and the larger ones from 8 to 12 cm.

Looking at those pictures it's hard to imagine that it had the enduring sound of today's cymbals, the pitch was probably much lower and had more of a 'clap' or a 'clank' sound. It, therefore, required a larger number of cymbal players to have an audible impact amidst the noise coming from the other musicians playing other instruments. Imagining the musical processions of the time musicians responsible for playing the cymbals had to be physically strong and fit. Banging those cymbals onto one another for long periods of time required quite a bit of stamina.

The Hebrew text uses two different words, tseltselim, and metsiltayim, both derived from the same Hebrew root tsalal which means to quiver, to cause vibration, and from there to tinkle. The smaller ones, possibly functioning as finger cymbals, produced a high-pitched tinkle, and the larger one most probably a lower-pitched tinkle. How much of a tinkle that was one can only imagine! The joy that came from being part of a musical procession must have been the combined effect of the cymbals, shofars (Horns), trumpets, harps, lyres, and tambourines! Combining that with the crowd shouting at the top of the voices, it must have been an unforgettable experience accompanied by hearing loss for a day or two. No wonder the writers of Psalm 42 missed it so much!

Thank you for joining this devotion!



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