

Summer in the Psalms: Thirst for more Thirst
 Psalm 42
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If you've had children, you know that bedtime is when the developing brain works on its creative ability to procrastinate. Somehow, without ever being taught, all children figure out that asking for one more story or one more hug is the ticket to staying awake for a couple more minutes. And sooner or later they all figure out that the ultimate request is for a drink of water.

At this any parent who is trying to walk the line between having some semblance of control in their house and going to jail for child abuse finds themselves in a serious dilemma. On this I read a story written by an older gentleman who was reminiscing about his son -he said:

About five minutes after my boy was in bed I heard the familiar "Daaad..."

"What?"

"I'm thirsty... can you bring me a drink of water?"

"No, you had your chance. Lights out!"

About 5 minutes later "Daaaaaaad" "What!?"

"I'm thirsty, Can I have a drink of water?"

"I told you NO! If you ask again you are going to get it."

Five minutes later "Daaaaaaad" "What?!?"

"When you come in to let me have it can you bring some water?"

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So have you ever been really thirsty?¹

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Today we are in the middle of our summer series where we are looking not just to learn about God, but to meet Him in the Psalms. And today we are in Psalm 42. So please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you and follow along. Psalm 42 is on page 401. As you turn there let me ask you again, have you ever been really thirsty?

I'm talking about when your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth; when you have to peel your lips off your teeth. I'm talking about so thirsty that the only thing you can think about is water. Have you ever been thirsty like that?

¹ Story adapted from <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/stay-thirsty-my-friends-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-jesus-christ-184061.asp?Page=1> (Accessed July 16, 2016)

Now the sensation of thirst is an interesting one. Let me give you a bit of the science behind it: Physically thirst occurs when the pituitary gland secretes two hormones that cause reactions in the kidneys and the hypothalamus which in turn send signals to the Salivary glands which reduce secretions to make our mouth dry. This is what alerts you to the fact that you need some water.

And because the brain is so involved in this, like yawning, just talking about being thirsty can actually cause this chain of chemical reactions to occur. So right now most of your mouths are dryer than you would like, and a nice cool glass of water would really hit the spot. (And I've got one so I'm going to enjoy that nice sip right now).

Alright, now that you've all endured a bit of torture at the hands of the pastor let's get into Psalm 42. What we find here is that the Sons of Korah, who wrote this psalm, are actually trying to do the same thing with our souls that I did with your mouths. They want to increase our thirst for an encounter with God.

So let's pick up the text in Psalm 42 starting in verse 1.

[Read Psalm 42:1-11]

As we get into this Psalm I would like to start with an overview of the situation it paints, then look at what the Psalmist did to encourage his soul. And finally we are going to end up in the words of Jesus drinking from the soul quenching mercy He pours out into the lives of His followers.

So first, the overview: This Psalm describes a dark place. It is about the spiritual oppression many godly people experience and the depression that our circumstances can lead us into. Now like last week there isn't a specific story linked to this text, we don't know exactly what was going on in the author's world as he writes, but this isn't important because this Psalm is designed to speak broadly into any number of situations godly men and women find themselves in.

So if you are currently facing circumstances outside your control, and these circumstances seek to beat you down. And if it feels fake to put a smile on and pretend everything is alright, this Psalm is for you.

Now we know a godly man wrote this because he describes where he's been. So in verse 4 he thinks back with fondness to times he's tasted the joy of the Lord. Do you remember times like that? And mentally he knows this is what he needs in this difficult time. He knows he needs to go to God for strength. He's thirsty for this like a deer looking for water. He wants to meet with God. He knows he needs more than simple information about God, he wants to experience Him afresh. He wants to taste His new mercies. He's a godly man.

But being godly is no promise that things are going to go well and in fact Jesus tells us quite the opposite is likely. And so here the Psalmist is experiencing oppression, and it is coming at him from outside and from within. So in verses 2 and 4 he describes a forced absence from the temple.

We know this because he asks “when can I go and meet with God?” And he reminisces about how he “used to go to the house of God.” Remember the Psalmist is a Jew, and the Jews met God in the temple, and so for the godly to be unable to do that would be devastating.

But even though he can't go to the temple he's still looking to God for His strength, but he finds himself coming up dry. God's answer doesn't seem to be coming any time soon. And he's even being ridiculed for holding to his faith. Verses 3 and 10 describe those around mocking him with the question “where is your God?” And in verse 7 things seem so bad that he's drowning – the waves are sweeping over him. And in verse 9 his enemies are intentionally oppressing him. So externally things are bad, and some of you know what this is like. Like the author there are circumstances or people in your life that are making things virtually impossible to bear.

But the bad isn't just on the outside – if it were it might be tolerable, but in this Psalm things are bad on the inside too. So the author is depressed. In verse 3 he's close to tears all the time. In verses 5 and 11 we get repeated words where he describes his soul as downcast and disturbed. In verse 10 his body is stressed by infirmity, even his bones seem to be giving way. And some of you know this internal turmoil as well.

So if you love Jesus and want to live for His glory but are in a spot where life seems to be overwhelming, this Psalm is for you. And some of us are there. Some of us have jobs that make it impossible to get together with other Christians regularly – and we know our faith suffers. And some of us feel the stress of not having enough time to do the most important things in life. Some of our relationships are struggling as we labor to get our priorities right. There are people in our lives who refuse to get along and seem bent on our demise; some of them mock our faith. And some of us have health issues that pile up on top of all of this. And for some, in the midst of the storm, the well of faith we turn to for comfort feels too shallow and too dry to keep us standing. We want to honour God, but we aren't sure we can carry on.

And into the midst of this situation Psalm 42 speaks of hope and an encounter with a living Saviour. The author seeks to point us to the source of refreshment that he found can quench any desert. He urges the godly to set our hearts towards hope.

So in verse 5 he talks to himself “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.” And again in verse 11 “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”

So the situation is terrible – this isn't an overstatement – but the choice the psalmist makes is to not give up. And so he looks for a cure, he finds a godly one, and he seeks to point us towards what he has found.

Now without dwelling on this too much it needs to be said that the world offers countless godless cures to spiritual depression. "Some people try to escape through divorce, excessive entertainment, or frequent vacations. Some pop pills [or escape into the bottle. Some people go shopping. But] all these 'cures' are ineffective. At best they merely lift our spirits for a time."²

But the Psalmist doesn't go to one of these cures, he chooses faith. He chooses hope. He chooses to continue to find his strength in God. He will not surrender to discouragement. He will not allow his heart to grow faithless.

Now here I want to say this Psalm does not deny the existence of clinical depression or chemical imbalances that may need medical attention to treat. By all means go to your doctor, but this Psalm is saying your doctor isn't God. And so if your depression is spiritual no amount of Prozac is going to treat it.

So let's look at 3 things the author uses to treat spiritual depression when his heart wants to give up.³

First, he is not afraid to be real with God, and he is confident God can handle it.

If you've ever watched someone walk away from faith you know that it almost never happens for a logical reason. Nobody gets reasoned out of following Christ. Instead what happens is something comes up and instead of pressing into God and choosing to pursue the answer with faith the person decides to withdraw. They slowly step back from the faith community. They stop praying, they stop reading their Bible and then when you bump into them in a year or so they are angry and say they don't believe.

This is something I've watched happen over and over again particularly in people in my age group and below. And when I try to talk with them and ask what is wrong the usual answer is "nothing, I don't want to talk about it." And usually the reason they don't want to talk about it is that the faith community has been traditionally very poor with handling the doubt of our brothers and sisters. We are threatened by it. We don't like questions without Sunday School answers, and so instead of listening to the cries of doubt as they are expressed we try to silence the crier by just telling them to have faith.

But here, in the midst of oppression and being treated wrongly and dealing with brutal circumstances the Psalmist shows us that this isn't the right way to deal with doubt.

² Montgomery Boice, James "Psalms Vol 2 42-106" (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 1996. Pg 370.

³ 3 methods of fighting back adapted from John Piper's "Spiritual Depression in the Psalms"
<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/spiritual-depression-in-the-psalms> (Accessed July 15, 2016)

Doubt can't be pushed down, it needs to be honestly expressed. And so in verse 9 he cries out "why have you forgotten me" God? And he feels no guilt as he expresses this because he knows God can handle it.

You see friends, doubt and faith exist on opposite sides of the same coin. And so expressing both of them to God is spiritually healthy – God can handle our doubt. It doesn't catch Him off guard.

The reason we are uncomfortable with doubt is that we often confuse it for faithlessness or unbelief, but these aren't the same thing. Unbelief is the decision to reject God. Doubt is the simple expression of not understanding what God could possibly be up to. And as such doubt is like faith. So Hebrews says:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)

So it's not faith to believe that 2 + 2 is 4. It's faith to believe that God is good and in control while the world seems bent on depravity and terrorism seems to reign. And doubt then is expressing bewilderment about what God could possibly be doing while the world seems bent on depravity and terrorism seems to reign.

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David is probably the greatest example in Scripture of a man who knew how to express doubt well. So in Psalm 13 David prays:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"

and my foes will rejoice when I fall. (Psalm 13:1-4)

David wasn't afraid to tell God how he was feeling. And God loves this. And the reason why is when we bring our doubt and troubles to Him it builds our relationship with Him. Expressing doubt is the opposite of giving God silent treatment which doesn't help anyone. It is when we keep doubt to ourselves that it festers into unbelief, but when we bring it to God doubt blossoms into faith.

And this is what is happening in Psalm 42. So in verse 9 the Psalmist questions why God has forgotten him, but he asks this from a position of faith. In verse 8 he has just said "By day the LORD directs His love, at night His song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life." The Psalmist admits he is doubting, but he admits this in prayer.

So friend, when you find yourself oppressed by circumstances outside your control and struggling with depression, choose to go to God with your struggles. And if your brother

or sister brings their doubt to you resist the temptation to answer impossible questions – we will never know why God allows what He does. So instead of answering lead them, like this Psalm does, to bring their doubt to God – He can handle it. Let doubt blossom into faith. This is the first thing the Psalmist does to treat his spiritual depression.

Second, the Psalmist encourages us to preach to ourselves.

This comes from verse 5 where he asks “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?” And then he admonishes himself: “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”

Did you know you are the most important preacher in your life? Sure it’s good to surround yourself with people who will speak God’s word to you, but nobody is around you as much as you are. And so we must learn to preach God’s word to ourselves.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, the famous pastor and commentator has some great insight into this. He says:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man’s treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. “Why art thou cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says,: “Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.”⁴

And this is biblical. In Corinthians Paul writes:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

So brothers and sisters, stop listening yourself into a spiritual stupor and learn to preach to yourself. As you hear your heart well up with bitterness or depression at the state of affairs you find yourself surrounded by speak God’s word into your situation. This is the second thing the Psalmist does to treat his spiritual depression.

Third, the Psalmist urges that we do everything we can to foster our thirst for God.

In verses 1 and 2 the Psalmist not only describes his desperation but encourages desperation for God. He fosters his thirst, and in doing this he reminds himself that the reason things aren’t perfect in his life is because the kingdom of God is not perfectly

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn “Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure” (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Pub Co.) 1965. Pg 20-21.

present yet. He thirsts because this life continually takes us away from the Oasis, and leaves us wallowing in the desert, and he knows there must be something more.

The fact is this side of heaven there are always going to be circumstances to beat us down and thoughts inside our heads to fight against, but the most dangerous place to find ourselves is in a spot where we aren't thirsty for God. This is the healthy response when you are in the midst of a desert.

It's when instead of thirst we experience contentment or apathy or lethargic laziness that spiritual depression thrives. And our culture has grown too efficient at dulling our thirst on the cures of the world.

There is a series of beer commercials called "The Most Interesting Man in the World". It's about an incredibly cool guy who doesn't always drink beer, but when he does he prefers Dos Equis – and each commercial ends with the line "Stay thirsty my friends."

The commercial understands that we all thirst for fulfillment. But the lie it peddles is that this fulfillment can be found outside of God. And so the Psalmist seeks to inspire thirst for God in himself by remembering the mercies he has tasted in the past.

So verse 4 says "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng." He has tasted and he's seen that the Lord is good, and he preaches to foster more desire. He refuses to be content with yesterdays mercies.

Yes, God has been present. God has moved. God has revealed Himself as our provider and sustainer and comfort and friend and healer and light and sanctifier and shepherd. Our God has been good. He has watched over us and protected us and empowered us and encouraged us. And we've met this God. He has come to us where we are. He's met us in our struggles, He's met us in our triumphs, at our work places, in our families, with our friends. He has never been far away; He has always been speaking. But He doesn't want us to be content with this. He wants us to want more. And so the only requirement He puts on those who come to Him is that we want what He has to give.

Friends, God will not force Himself on us. While He pursues us as we run away, He never forces our hand or removes our free will. He never begs for our attention or grovels for our worship. He won't do that because while He wants us He doesn't need us. He wants to use us to increase His glory. He wants to use us to expand His kingdom. But He is God so He will not be pitied. He won't accept anyone who comes to Him without need. He will be our God or He won't have anything to do with us at all.

Those without thirst then are those without God. So brothers and sisters foster your thirst. Don't quench it too easily. Don't dull it on counterfeit cures. Let it grow, let it consume you, and let it drive you to grow discontent with every false cure. Foster your thirst for God.

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So the Psalmist urges us to take our doubt to God without fear knowing that He can handle it. And he urges us to preach God's word to ourselves instead of listening to our hearts gripe. And he inspires us to foster our thirst for the only One who will truly satisfy. He speaks as one who has walked through oppression and depression and lived to rejoice. But what the Psalmist knew was only a shadow of what is available to us.

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I want to let this Psalm point now beyond itself to the person of Jesus Christ who is the ultimate cure the Psalmist prophesied of but never knew in person.

So in verse 2 the Psalmist cries "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" And the answer for us is now! And this is the good news that Jesus brought. So when Jesus' disciples asked Him how they could know God He responded:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you really know Me, you will know My Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him. (John 14:6-7)

So Jesus is the infinitely rich well designed to quench our thirst and foster our desire for more at the same time. He is the flawless image of God and the only vessel able to pour the Trinity's richest mercies into our parched and desperate souls. And Jesus offers this unfathomably lush grace to everyone who trusts in His name. This is the good news of the Gospel.

Now there are lots of texts that illustrate this throughout the New Testament, but one of the greatest is found in John 7 where Jesus is celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles.

Tabernacles was one of the biggest celebrations in the Jewish calendar. It was like Christmas and Thanksgiving and Canada Day all rolled into one. And during this feast the High Priest would go the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher. He would dip it into the water and carry it back to the temple. And when he would get back he would pour the water out on the altar of sacrifice. And the cloud of steam that would form would picture the gift of God's presence.

And at that moment the Levites would blow trumpets and the crowd would cry out with words from the prophet Isaiah: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."⁵ And the people would go crazy, leaping and dancing and shouting and singing and Hallelujahs would fill the air.⁶

⁵ Isaiah 12:3

⁶ This thought is adapted from Pastor Jeffrey Smead "Stay Thirsty My Friends" <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/stay-thirsty-my-friends-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-jesus-christ-184061.asp?Page=1> (Accessed July 15, 2016)

Jesus was at this feast in John 7, and right at the climax when that pitcher would have been poured out we read:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. (John 7:37-39)

Jesus presented Himself as the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament people of God were looking for. He was the presence of God, and the soul's thirst quencher. And He knew that the ritual of religion only alluded to what He had to offer. After the Feast was over the people were going to go back to their lives. They were going to find themselves surrounded by the same external oppressions, they were going to continue fighting the same internal depressions. And many people today find themselves in the same place; they are drawing water from the wrong well.

Instead of drawing power from the Spirit Jesus fills His followers with we have gone to other sources looking for life. And every time we do this we come up dry. And as we come up dry repeatedly we begin to lose our thirst.

But Jesus gives us the answer to this incredibly human problem. So if you are battling oppression and depression and are thirsty for more from life, and at the same time if you recognize you aren't thirsty enough and want to increase your thirst, then come to Jesus who says "Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink."

Jesus says anyone can encounter God if they come to Him. So if you want to live a Spirit empowered life it is available to you. Your dry heart can be saturated by rivers of living water. This is Jesus' promise to anyone who thirsts and will come to Him.

So brothers and sisters, stay thirsty my friends. Cut yourself off from the world's soul dehydrating cures that sap your desire for true life and thirst for what God wants you to have. Thirst for a life of victory. Thirst to live a life that counts. Thirst to finish your race in a way that earns your Father's "well done." And thirst for more thirst because the only requirement Jesus has for those who get His living water is that they come to Him thirsty. Jesus says "If anyone is thirsty.... Then let them come to Me and drink."

Friends come to Jesus for a drink that both satisfies and leaves you thirstier for the promise that there is infinitely more to come. Thirst for more thirst.