

# Psalm 42-43: God's Absence and our Longing



## Psalm 42-43 (41-42) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

Psalms 42 and 43 form one piece. Psalm 42 comprises Parts 1 and 2 and Psalm 43 completes the song with Part 3.

It is interesting to note that God is invoked twenty-two times under a variety of titles. This gives a comprehensive dimension to the psalm, since there are twenty-two consonants in the Hebrew alphabet.

The central theme is that of God's absence, an absence which stretches desire.

The psalmist has experienced God's presence. He is exiled from the sanctuary and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness. He experiences God as absent. He is like a timid, alert female deer which has the scent of the life-giving water and is longing for it.

Like the deer that longs for running streams,  
so I am longing for you, my God.  
My whole being thirsts for you, the living God.  
When will I come and see your face?

## Ezekiel 47:1-9

‘He brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar ... Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep.

## Ezekiel 47:1-9

‘Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed ... Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.’

My tears have been my food  
by day and by night,  
as I hear it said all the day long:  
‘Where is your God?’

‘He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he  
wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son”’(Matthew 27:43).

These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd  
into the house of God,  
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving,  
the throng wild with joy.

*Why are you cast down, my soul?*

*Why groan within me?*

*Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,  
my Saviour and my God.*

## Part Two (Psalm 42:6-10)

The psalmist gives expression to the sadness that comes over him as he describes being overwhelmed with forces of chaos, made all the more painful by the taunts slung at him for believing. In his pain, he prays:



My soul is cast down within me  
as I think of you,  
from the region of the Jordan and Mount Hermon,  
from the hill of Mizar.

Deep calls to deep  
In the roaring of the waters.  
All your waves and your billows  
crash over me.

By day the Lord sends forth  
such gracious love.

By night I keep singing,  
pleading to the living God.

I say to God, my rock:  
'Why have you forgotten me?  
*Why must I go mourning  
oppressed by the foe?*

With cries that pierce me to the heart  
my enemies revile me,  
saying to me all the day long:  
'Where is your God?'

*Why are you cast down, my soul?* [see verse 5]

*Why groan within me?*

*Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,  
my saviour and my God.*

## Part Three (Psalm 43:1-4)

As in Part One the psalmist thinks of the cult (holy mountain, dwelling, altar, praise). The imagery of this concluding section is taken from the court, as the psalmist is appealing to the highest tribunal – that of God. He expresses his desire and his trust that he will experience again the communion with God which he experienced in the past.

The priest used to pray Psalm 43  
at the beginning of the Mass

You be my judge, O God.

Defend my cause against a godless people.

Rescue me from those who are deceitful and unjust.

You are my God.

I take refuge in you.

Why have you cast me off?

*Why must I go mourning*

*oppressed by the foe?* [see Psalm 42:9]

O send forth your light and your truth;

let these be my guide;

let them bring me to your holy mountain,

to the place where you dwell.

I will come to the altar of God,  
God, my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise you on the harp,  
O God, my God.

*Why are you cast down, my soul?* [see Psalm 42:5 and 11]

*Why groan within me?*

*Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,  
my saviour and my God.*

Psalm 44:17-19, 23-24

‘All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant.

Our heart has not turned back,  
nor have our steps departed from your way,  
yet you have ... covered us with deep darkness ...

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off forever!

Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?’

‘I am thirsty’(John 19:38).

‘If you drink of the water that I will give you, you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’(John 4:14).

‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift’( Revelation 22:17).



## Sirach 24:19-21

‘Come to me, you who desire me,  
and eat your fill of my fruits.

For the memory of me is sweeter than honey,  
and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb.

Those who eat of me will hunger for more,  
and those who drink of me will thirst for more.’

1. Where have you hidden, Beloved,  
and left me moaning?  
You fled like the stag  
after wounding me;  
I went out calling you, and you were gone.

2. Shepherds, you that go up  
through the sheepfolds to the hill,  
If by chance you see  
Him I love most,  
Tell him that I sicken, suffer, and die.

3. Seeking my Love, I will go off  
to the mountains and to the waterside;  
I will not gather flowers,  
nor fear wild beasts;  
I will go beyond strong men and frontiers.

4. O woods and thickets  
planted by the hand of my Beloved!  
O green meadow,  
coated, bright, with flowers,  
Tell me, has he passed by you?

5. Pouring out a thousand graces,  
He passed these groves in haste;  
And having looked at them,  
with his image alone,  
He clothed them in beauty.

6. Ah, who has the power to heal me?  
Now wholly surrender yourself!  
Do not send me  
any more messengers.  
They cannot tell me what I must hear.

7. All who are free  
tell me a thousand graceful things of You;  
all wound me more and leave me  
dying of I-know-not-what  
behind their stammering.

8. How do you endure. O life,  
not living where you live?  
And being brought near death  
by the arrows you receive from that  
which you conceive of your Beloved?

9. Why, since you wounded this heart,  
do you not heal it?  
And why, since you stole it from me,  
do you leave it so,  
and fail to carry off what you have stolen?

10. Extinguish these miseries,  
since no one else can stamp them out;  
and may my eyes behold you,  
because you are their light,  
and I would open them to you alone.

11. Reveal your presence, and may  
the vision of your beauty be my death;  
For the sickness of love  
is not cured  
except by your presence and image.

12. O crystal spring!  
If only, on your silvered-over face,  
you would suddenly form  
the eyes I desire, which I bear  
sketched deep within my heart.

1. "One dark night  
Fired with love's urgent longings  
- Ah, the sheer grace! -  
I went out unseen,  
My house being now all stilled;

2. In darkness and secure,  
by the secret ladder, disguised,  
- Ah, the sheer grace! -  
In darkness and concealment,  
My house being now all stilled;

3. On that glad night  
In secret, for no one saw me  
Nor did I look at anything  
with no other light or guide  
than the one that burned in my heart.



John of the Cross  
'One Dark Night'

4. This guided me more surely  
than the light of noon  
to where he waited for me  
- Him I knew so well -  
in a place where no one else appeared.

5. O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
the Lover with his beloved  
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast  
which I kept wholly for Him alone,  
there he lay sleeping,  
And I caressing Him  
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When this breeze blew from the turret,  
parting His hair,  
He wounded my neck  
with his gentle hand  
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,  
laying my face on my Beloved.  
All things ceased;  
I went out from myself  
to leave my cares forgotten among lilies”.