

## Prayer

Thanks be to You, Lord God, for You have given us this day the gifts of happiness; delight, joy, surprise, wonder, enjoyment, and every kind of good and wholesome experience. Be with us also when life is tough; in pain, sorrow, upset, shock, disquiet and every kind of difficult personal experience. Help us and save us, O Lord, so that we do not lose Your true perspective on all that happens to us: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Possessions

Ask the Lord to help you keep what you need and dispose of what you do not. Pray that the Lord will give you the wisdom and courage to view your possessions spiritually, so that you can properly assess their place within your life and your work within the Kingdom of God. The Lord loves your soul, and delights to see you fulfilled and at peace at home and at work.

## Meditation

Great God who speaks to us all  
through the wonder and the greatness of creation;  
Speak to me through the whisper of a breeze  
and the flight of a butterfly.

Great God who speaks to us all  
through history and the lives of great people;  
Speak to me through the mystery of a conversation  
and the power of human emotions.

Great God who speaks to us all  
through the power of music which moves the soul;  
Sing to me in the melody of an enchanting tune  
which dances through my mind all day.

Great God who speaks to us all  
through epic world events unfolding all around us;  
Speak to me through the glorious uncertainty  
of everything I can do this day.

Great God who speaks to all!  
may I hear Your voice and know Your will today.

## Bible Study - Psalm 42

*For the director of music. A maskil of the  
Sons of Korah.*

<sup>1</sup> *As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.*

<sup>2</sup> *My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.*

*When can I go  
and meet with God?*

<sup>3</sup> *My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while men say to me all day long,  
"Where is your God?"*

<sup>4</sup> *These things I remember  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I used to go with the multitude,  
leading the procession to the house of  
God,*

*with shouts of joy and thanksgiving  
among the festive throng.*

<sup>5</sup> *Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
Why so disturbed within me?*

*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,  
my Saviour and <sup>6</sup> my God.*

*My soul is downcast within me;  
therefore I will remember you  
from the land of the Jordan, the heights of  
Hermon*

*from Mount Mizar.*

<sup>7</sup> *Deep calls to deep  
in the roar of your waterfalls;  
all your waves and breakers  
have swept over me.*

<sup>8</sup> *By day the LORD directs his love,  
at night his song is with me*

*a prayer to the God of my life.*  
9 *I say to God my Rock,  
"Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I go about mourning,  
oppressed by the enemy?"*  
10 *My bones suffer mortal agony  
as my foes taunt me,*

*saying to me all day long,  
"Where is your God?"*  
11 *Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,  
my Saviour and my God*

## Review

Psalm 42 is one of the great poetic treasures of the Book of Psalms. It does not describe beauty or glory of God like the great Psalms of creation (e.g Psalm 8, 24), instead, it portrays a great struggle of faith: yet the majestic poetry brings this agony of the heart to life, making it immediately appealing to every generation. Few people have not been inspired by the opening words; 'As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for You ...' (42:1)

As we look at the struggle of faith which the Psalm describes, we find that it moves through two clear phases in Psalm 42, gradually moving towards a resolution, but not quite. The first four verses ask the question, 'where is ... God' (42:3), and the beautiful poetry makes us feel that is an earnest and yet somehow a certain quest, as if the writer of the psalm has been used to relying on God's presence and guidance, but for some reason, becomes suddenly alone, like a deer which has wandered away from water whilst grazing (42:1,2). The first reaction of the writer is to go back to the memory (42:4) of the worship of God which has inspired the writer in the past; perhaps this is how God may be found again?

The second reaction of the writer is to reflect upon the magnificent creative work of God; 'I will remember You from the land of the Jordan ... deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls.' (42:6,7), but this attempt to recall God and call for His help appears to frustrate the writer, who needs something more from God than pleasant scenery. As if experiencing strong challenges from others, he complains; 'why have you forgotten me? ... my foes taunt me ... all day long, "where is Your God?"' (42:9,10). Each of us who reads this psalm may find that this reflects something of our journey of faith, but such problems have not prevented us from pursuing our faith vigorously and we have not yielded to doubt simply because of the pressure of the questioning or taunting of others. This is reflected quite powerfully in the last verse; 'why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him ...' (42:11)

It is at this point that we notice something rather interesting about the psalm, which is that verse 5 and verse 11 are the same; 'Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.' Now, although this is interesting, it is even more fascinating to look further on to the next psalm (Psalm 43) and discover that these words are used at the end of this psalm as well! It has always been recognised that Psalms 42 and 43 do in fact belong together. Some of the oldest manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament have no division between the two, and the Psalms were not 'numbered' in those days as we are used today. Further, Psalm 43 does not have a superscription at its beginning to impede the flow from one psalm to another, which is unique amongst the psalms of the second Book (Psalms 42 – 72); and this is another good reason to link the two together.

The general structure of the two psalms, when placed together, is four verses (42:1-4) followed by refrain (42:5), and then four verses (42:6-10) followed by refrain (42:11), and lastly another four verses (43:1-4) and refrain (43:5)! It is a fairly convincing poetic structure. In addition, we will find that whereas the first two parts of this within Psalm 42 pose questions about the writer's relationship with God because of a sense of being spiritually lost, the third and last part of the whole structure (in Psalm 43) confidently resolves these questions. Undoubtedly, Psalms 42 and 43 belong together and we will bear this in mind in our studies both today and tomorrow.

## Going Deeper

In common with many of the greatest and most used Psalms, there are sections of the Psalm where there is considerable dispute about the meaning of some of its words. I will mention this where the uncertainty is such that we must explore the text more fully, but we will not look at every textual 'problem', which you will find described in any standard commentary. One thing should be very clear, however, which is that this Psalm does not claim to be 'of David' in the

opening superscription. The Psalm is 'A maskil of the Sons of Korah'; Korah being a Levitical family with a chequered history in Israel, but with some responsibility for music in the Temple worship after the days of King Solomon (see 2 Chron 20:19).

### ***The problem***

The magnificent opening of the Psalm in verse 1 hides a deep unhappiness of the soul, gradually brought to light in the first three verses. But what is it? The picture of a deer searching for water when it is thirsty because of drought or perhaps because of chase and flight, is explained with poetic elegance as an image of the soul's longing for God (42:1). We have already noted its poetic beauty, but it hides the fear of uncertainty, lost-ness and longing. We could gloss over these details, but they need our attention. Why was the author not able to 'come and behold the face of God'? (42:2) Under what circumstances would an Israelite be so upset and mournful because of the taunt 'where is your God'? (42:

We can answer this from our own experience, but the Bible gives us these words as from the experience of God's people at some time in their history, and by answering these questions for those who wrote the text rather than ourselves, we will find more of God's Word.

Many answers to these questions have been considered. Could it be the feelings of a King of Judah who has been temporarily taken captive, such as King Manasseh who was taken to Babylon but allowed to return after he repented to God, as in 2 Chron 33:11-13? Could it be the feelings of a senior court official later on in Judean history, when the entire Judean court was taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:13-17)? This was an event which certainly caused people to question their faith in God. It is not possible to be exact about this, but this seems to be the most likely background for the Psalm. We will now see whether the progression of thought in the Psalm fits this scenario, or whether we should look further.

### ***The first hope***

Faced with the collapse of all that the writer held dear, and his inability to worship God in the way to which he was accustomed, what could he do? In his ears were ringing the taunts of his captors who believed that if they had sacked Jerusalem, then they had destroyed the 'God' who lived there! The big question facing all those who endured the Babylonian invasion was whether they were able to sustain their faith through everything that happened when they were exiled to Babylon, and it is the great story of the Old Testament, spoken and recorded by the prophets, that God's people did rediscover their faith. They found that God was not limited to Jerusalem but was ever present in the hearts of those who loved Him (see Jeremiah 31:31-34); but this was not immediately clear to the people who endured the humiliation of exile. The discovery of this faith took time.

Read in this way, Psalm 42 indicates how those suffering people coped with their 'hell' of exile. Firstly, in verses 1 to 4, they used their memory to recall the joys and privileges of the worship that they once enjoyed; 'how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God ... with shouts of joy and thanksgiving' (42:4). However, simply remembering the good things of life, or trying to get things in perspective by recalling the past, will not of itself bring healing. Something which is becoming increasingly well known by Christian counsellors! Despite recollections and memories, the writer's soul is still downcast, and this is reflected in the first sentence of the refrain 'why are you cast down, O my soul, and why so disturbed within me. Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God' (42:5). It seems as if the enemy's taunt which have depressed the writer have affected him so much that they dominates his thoughts, and will not go away.

In response, the writer thoughtfully rehearses some of the articles of faith that he learned in his youth; 'put your hope in God' (42:5); 'I will praise Him, my Saviour and my God' (42:5). One has the feeling that his soul is still cast down, but the signs are there within the words of the refrain that there is a way through the turmoil. The simply expressed truths of faith that we first learn tend to stay with us, particularly when life is at its hardest!

### ***The second hope***

In the second stanza (42:6-10), the writer starts by rehearsing the same thing again 'why is my soul cast down ...' (42:6) and then reflects on the beauties of Canaan; the wondrous source of the Jordan, where water cascades down from the snow capped Mount Hermon. Will the writer's soul, spiritually parched and dry ('as the deer longs for flowing streams ...') drink from

this pure water in a land far away from the holy city of Jerusalem? No, for him it is as if these waters have turned into a terrible sweeping chaos (42:7) reflective of the primeval chaos out of which God made the world (Gen 1,2). In response to this, he turns to God himself recalling His presence (42:8).

Now, one feels, the author is getting somewhere with his despair. By turning to his recollection of God instead of to rituals and people, he is moving towards the hope that he so desperately needs. The taunts continue in verses 9 and 10, but there is a note of defiance 'why must I walk about mournfully, oppressed by the enemy?' (v9), and this is the beginning of his restoration (as we will find out tomorrow). Here now, is the beginning of hope, and by the time that the refrain of the Psalm comes round again (42:11), it is as if the focus now is not so much on the complaint 'why is my soul cast down?' but on the potential solution; 'Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God'.

## Application

The author has come a long way to deal with the despair of his situation as an Israelite in exile. He has further to go which we will discover tomorrow as we look at Psalm 43. However, the path already trod has much to teach us. Even when we feel most distant from our Lord, the path is already there for us to find faith again, if we will walk it.

If you have been in a place of dark despair and feel that God has all but abandoned you, then you will know how hard it is to take hold of the truths of faith which will eventually bring you through. One of my concerns for people within the church today is that because of the lack of discipline in learning scripture, creeds, prayers and many other important features of Christian life, many people are left vacant when trouble comes. It is so tempting to say 'come and be a Christian, you don't have to lean complicated words, or sing funny hymns with long words, or learn complicated formulae to express your faith, just turn up and have a good time!' Frankly, I observe that that is how some churches advertise themselves on the internet. Yet without the traditional disciplines whereby a disciple gets to know their faith so that it can become rooted in every part of life, then trouble and persecution (as Jesus foretold) will always lead a person away from that faith. It is too casual, and it has no root.

Accept the disciplines of Scripture and the church, and let your faith grow deep. Then you will be able to endure, just like the writer of Psalm 42. It is possible he endured the most terrible of experiences, exile in a foreign land and separation from the object of their worship in Jerusalem (where they believed God lived). But he did not lose faith, as this psalm shows.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you experienced the despair of feeling at a distance from the God in whom you believe? How does this Psalm offer help?
2. How important is memory to you? Is your faith built upon the memory of what God has done for you in the past or in the present?
3. Which part of this Psalm speaks to you most? Share your views in your group.

## Discipleship

Is it possible for people to be completely secure in their faith? The evidence from the life of the church around us is that many people do fall away under pressure and stress of some sort. It is vital that we each do our best to see our path of discipleship as a discipline as well as an exciting journey, so that we are well protected. Christ does not let us down, we let ourselves down when we fail to read His Word and learn about it, for example. One other way in which we can become more secure is through sharing our faith more with others. A resolution to do this will go a long way towards helping us at times of spiritual trouble.

## Final Prayer

Great God of power and majesty, understand my weakness I pray. When I feel most vulnerable, stay with me even when I doubt You or begin to question You. Teach me daily what it means to be a true discipleship, so that my faith is not a collection of feelings and thoughts, but the very heart of my being. I ask this through Jesus Christ, my Lord. AMEN