

## Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, Your love is never ending, infinitely expressive, forever undeserved, supremely generous, overwhelmingly joyful, powerfully caring, utterly unselfish, completely satisfying and awesomely true; for You died for me and rose again to give me both new life and Your Holy Spirit. May I never forget these truths of my faith. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Possessions

Take the opportunity to praise God today for all the good things you possess. The Lord has provided you with many things which are for your pleasure and delight, and many things which you can and should use for His praise and glory. Make sure that you know which is which, and offer Him the praise and glory for everything you possess which enriches your life.

## Meditation

Thank You Lord God for the infinite potential of this day;

And the prospects You have given us for good, and not for ill.

for the possibilities created by time in which to do things,

and the energy You have given us to use it for what is right.

for the fascinating sights we may see before our eyes,

and the revelations You have given us to guide our understanding

for the joy of human relationships with which we are surrounded,

and the love You have given us for the people we will meet.

for the secrets and mysteries which this world holds for us,

and the knowledge You have given us to help us build our lives.

for the opportunities afforded us to do good to those around us,

and the integrity You have given us by which we are judged by others.

for the hopes we have for life ahead and hopes for days to come,

and the promises You have given us of our place in Your eternity.

Thank You, Lord God, for the infinite potential of this day.

## Bible Study - Psalm 43

<sup>1</sup> *Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause*

*against an ungodly nation;*

*from deceitful and wicked men'*

*Deliver me!*

<sup>2</sup> *You are God my stronghold.*

*Why then have you rejected me?*

*Why must I go about mourning,*

*Because of oppression by the*

*enemy?*

<sup>3</sup> *Send out your light and your truth,*

*let them guide me;*

*let them bring me to your holy mountain,*

*to the place where you dwell.*

<sup>4</sup> *Then will I go to the altar of God,*

*to God, my joy and my delight.*

*I will praise you with the harp,*

*O God, my God.*

<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 my God.*

## Review

As we saw yesterday, Psalm 43 follows on directly from Psalm 42. It has a four verse reflection on the continuing problem (43:1-4) experienced by the psalmist, followed by a final verse which repeats the refrain found in both psalms; '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' (42:5,11 and 43:5).

It is best if we try to understand what Psalm 43 says by looking at the whole sequence of the combined Psalms 42 and 43, and then we will find that although the words of the refrain are always the same, they take on a different feel, reflecting the verses which come immediately before them (42:1-4, 42:6-10 and 43:1-4 respectively). When we first came across this refrain in Psalm 42 it read like a cry of despair from the heart of one who felt abandoned by God and taunted by those around him. Everything was coloured by the pain of rejection, just as the people of Israel would have felt when they were driven from Jerusalem and their beloved Judean homelands by the Babylonians. In the second half of Psalm 42, the author had come to terms with what had happened, having found some comfort in recalling events and people from his past (42:4). He then found it helpful to remember the God he once worshipped in the Temple, even though he questioned God quite sharply, still feeling the pain of rejection; 'Oh God, my rock, why have You forgotten me!' (42:9). The second refrain at the end of Psalm 42, therefore, sounds more like someone as we would say, 'pulling himself together', and it has a far greater sense of hope.

Then in Psalm 43 and with all this in mind, the author, moved by the injustice done to him and his nation, calls out to God for help (43:1). He still wants to know why God has let him down (43:2), but calls on God to send 'light and truth' (43:3) so that he may once more worship God himself. He has certainly moved on to a place of confidence, and the refrain (43:5) sounds now as if the author is chastising himself for having been so downhearted, because as he should have known all along, God's eternal promises are true and they give him hope.

For this reason, verses 1-4 of Psalm 43 are probably the most important in the whole 'double-Psalm'. They represent the final part of a process whereby the soul has turned from despair to positive hope; and if we are right about the context in which this poem arose, this has happened for one of God's people in an extreme, even life-threatening situation (the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem and the subsequent Exile). It is hard for us to imagine what all this meant for the Judeans who experienced it (see yesterday's notes). It is bad enough for anyone to be taken captive by an enemy, but the sheer vulnerability and disempowerment of being taken from an orderly society to an unknown foreign land to live in the extremes of poverty, is almost wholly beyond our experience or understanding.

I once described the Judean Exile in 587BC to some English Anglicans, explaining that it would be like Britain being overrun by an occupying power that blew up all the churches and cathedrals, and then deported everyone to North African country. One person laughed and said 'it just wouldn't happen'. But that was my point. The Judean people simply did not believe that God would ever allow such a thing to happen; but it did happen, and they had to respond to what happened in order to live, or die in anguish and despair. They had to find their faith again, in the most extreme of circumstances. Eventually, this meant that the Judeans grew stronger in faith, and this resurgence and renewal (described in Ezra and Nehemiah) gave rise to the hope of the coming 'Messiah', our Lord Jesus Christ. In the end, both Jews and Christians came to see the importance of the Exile to mature faith in God, and Psalms 42 and 43 reflect this.

## Going Deeper

We will now go through Psalm 43 verse by verse and look at the details of what it says about how God can transform the human soul from unhappiness or despair to confidence and joy. There are plenty of wonderful texts to read in this Psalm, which you may well know better than Psalm 42 (because it reads better in church), but our understanding of its context and origins in the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem remain essential.

### Honest prayer

Whilst the author has remembered God in Psalm 42, it is only in Psalm 43 that he addresses God himself with something more than complain or the cry of a wounded soul; the words 'Vindicate me, O God and plead my cause against an ungodly nation ...' are aggressive and bold. The writer of our Psalm has now stopped ruminating, reflecting and wallowing in self pity as previously (42:9,10). He has now moved on to address God directly in prayer, pouring out his feelings not just for himself, but for his nation, the People of God.

What the psalmist asks for is vindication and deliverance. This is not surprising; such words were common in the historic psalms used in Solomon's Temple for centuries previously (see Ps 26:1, 35:24, 54:1, 135:14), and in those psalms they reflected the experience of David who fought to establish the principles of justice, honour of others and respect of God which had held the nation together (despite problems) for years. Now, the Babylonians had thrown the Israelite's high morality away like so much dross. The Psalmist cried to God for vindication of what was right against the evils of the Babylonians, and for deliverance from those who clearly did not have the same principled values of human life which were fundamental to the Israelite people and their heritage.

There is a tone of inquisitive strength to the next verse; 'You are God my stronghold, why have You rejected me?' What had happened was still a mystery to the psalmist, but one that he would have to live with, and he now realised this as he addresses his Lord in prayer. The second half of verse 2 'why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy' is not merely the bewailing of fate (it would have sounded like that had it been in the earlier part of Psalm 42), but a questioning of his own motives and actions before Almighty God. In prayer, the writer has realised that such behaviour is quite inappropriate. He may have been forced to leave the Temple behind at the point of a sword, but because he was still able to speak to Almighty God in prayer, God was still with him despite the loss of the Temple! Why then should he behave as if in total despair?

### ***Changing perspectives***

It is a most extraordinary fact of true prayer that when we bring our heartfelt agonies to the Almighty, He can change our perspective of them radically, sometimes to the point of removing them altogether; and this is what happens here. The next verse (43:3) is a call by the writer to God, asking Him to lead the people now, just as He had led His people of old. The old stories told of Moses being led through the desert by God's presence in cloud and fire, of visiting the 'mountain of God' (Mt. Sinai) where the Law was given which had held God's people together for centuries. Equally, these words (43:3) could reflect the lights and scrolls (of scripture) which were paraded at the major festival and pilgrimages to Jerusalem (also called the 'mountain of God'), as the author remembered with great affection.

Verse 4 is a little different, but it is not too difficult to understand. The psalmist says 'The I will go the altar of God ... I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.' (43:4). Now in the circumstances he faced, he knew he could not go back to the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was utterly destroyed when the Babylonians had invaded, and there was no altar to return to; no Temple, no holy of holies, no ten commandments in stone, no Temple courtyards. It was all gone. I suggest that the author knew this, and was talking about the spiritual delight of worship, with the hope that one day it would be possible to return. But in the meantime, God was still with him in spirit.

This, for a Judean, was a new and radical revelation. For this reason the final call of the refrain in verse 5 now reads like a triumphant and climactic call; a burst of ecstatic joy, arising from deep within a human spirit that has received the joyous spiritual discovery that God is indeed everywhere, and with His people even in their darkest hour. Nothing can destroy such faith!

### **Application**

This reading of Psalms 42 and 43 may well be contentious for some, because I have tied it to the suggested 'context' of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem. Alternatively, you can take each small section of this psalm and make of it what you will because it says many different

things, some of them appealing to Christians today, but some of them disturbing. For example, how can someone of faith saw 'vindicate me, O God' (43:1) when as Christians, we believe that we have no right to claim any personal 'justification'? However, a verse which says 'send out your light and truth' (43:3) could be taken out of the context of the psalm as a whole and used as a perfect text for an evangelistic sermon! I suggest that the way to do justice to God's Word is to try to see the widest picture possible within which the text can make sense, and this will give us the best starting point for understanding it; and the best basis for understanding this psalm which fits its themes and the real history of God's people amply recorded in the Old Testament, is the context of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem. This brings the psalm to life and in no way diminishes the power of its more applicable texts for the Christian preacher.

I recall teaching some time ago about the journey of self discovery travelled by one who is undergoing Christian counselling. The principle was this; firstly go inward, secondly go upward, thirdly go outward. In other words, someone with a problem should first express it by searching themselves deeply and talking about their feelings (inward). Then, secondly, they should recall their faith in God and what the Christian faith reveals about their circumstances, and they should pray (upward). Finally, by the power of the Spirit, they should face their problems and embrace the future with the knowledge that God is with them; a perspective previously impossible because of the problem.

This is a fine set of ideas which explores counselling theory through the eyes of Christian faith. However, the whole cycle of change which it describes is found in Psalms 42 and 43!

Why is it that we have lost the art of using scripture with imagination to discover truths of the human spirit and the provision of God? When we explore the Psalms in these studies, we cannot expect to get everything 'right', especially when dealing with very ancient texts. However, by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each of us can have an engaging attitude to scripture as a whole which enables us to touch and sometimes grasp the greater truths of the Gospel. Such truths are not our property, but Gods, and He will offer them to us as we read His Word; but we do need to read widely, and with passion!

## **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. How easy do you find it to get out of the 'doldrums'? Do you find that praying to Almighty God helps? If not, why not?
2. Do you experience God as present with you all the time? Is the Lord just especially present at special times; how would you describe His presence?
3. Has the overall study of Psalms 42 and 43 made you think differently about the Psalms? In what ways?

## **Discipleship**

There is much for us to think about in this Psalm. However, as yesterday, I urge you to read through both psalms together in order to obtain the most benefit from them. We so often want the Psalm 43 part of vindication and resolution but dismiss the fact that we may need to give full expression to our distress and grief (as in the earlier Psalm 42) in order to arrive at a safer place. Reflect on the really difficult experiences of your own life which you are reminded of by Psalms 42 and 43.

## **Final Prayer**

Great God of wonders and majestic Lord of all Creation, lead me by Your Spirit to understand Your Word. Give me the heart to read the Bible with passion and vigour, searching out the details and truths that it contains, and rejoicing in the guidance that its pages offer. Lead me into all truth I pray.