

THE LONGING

Psalm 42:1-11

What does it mean to be homesick? This emotion is apparently fairly commonly experienced by people when they move to a new place in their life's journey. It is something that parents may expect to hear about when they send their kids to summer camp or when their children graduate from high school and go away to college or to basic training for the military. Some of us would just rather be home than be away even on vacation – that's probably not what is meant by being homesick which is a deeper, emotional longing.

I guess it is even possible to be homesick for a place we have never been before. I've had times that could be called "brief moments" when I have thought or felt that I belonged to some place other than where I was at the time. Those feelings may be what inspired the hymn by Jim Reeves that laments "This world is not my home." This may also remind us of the Scripture passage (Hebrews 11:10) about Abraham who was said to have "looked for a city whose builder and maker is God."

It may be that what we recognize as being homesick is also similar to what some have referred to as a void in every human heart that can only be satisfied by God. Humanity's original "home" was the Garden of Eden and perhaps we could argue that we have been trying to return to that ideal place ever since the "fall" and Adam and Eve were evicted. That was the place where they were close to God and that closeness to God is likely what is missing rather than the physical place and surroundings associated with that interaction and relationship with God that was lost.

There was a point in David's life when he was in exile in the territory of Moab where he had taken his extended family so that they would not be harmed by Saul and those who were supporting Saul. We may recall that Moab was fairly close to Israel and it was as natural choice to take his family since his grandmother Ruth was from that part of the world. It is thought that David experienced homesickness (or separation anxiety) since he was isolated from Israel and could not freely go to the Tabernacle of God. Some commentaries place this longing to be associated when David was away from Jerusalem during the rebellion of Absalom. While David is not mentioned as the author of this Psalm, scholars say that it is certainly in the style of David. One could also believe that those Jews who were exiled in Babylon would have experienced the emotions expressed in this Psalm.

Thirsty – 42:1-4

¹For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah. As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. ²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, While *they* say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ⁴These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng *and* lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Psalm 42:1-4 (NASB95)

People who have experienced closeness to God in "a mountain top experience" will normally desire to experience His presence again. As we can all appreciate, most of life is lived in the routine of common and everyday occurrences and experiences. One day is similar to any other day and we get comfortable with the same old, same old. In the Israelite culture there were designated events of celebrations in which people participated and these were special times for them since they were converging on a place where the presence of God was believed to be.

These special times were in addition to the times when devout Israelites would pray three times each day. We can remember from the accounts recorded in the book of Acts that following

the birth of the church, it was still a common practice for people to go to the Temple for a time of prayer. Going back 500 years before that we find that Daniel prayed three times a day even though he was very far away from the Temple.

Some people today say that they can sense a closeness to God when they go to church and this sense is satisfying and serves to draw them back repeatedly to relive that experience. I think that a lot of the routines and rituals that are practiced in churches today have developed from times when a particular activity was done and the people experienced an awareness of God's presence and the activity was repeated in the hope of recreating that awareness.

The author of this psalm had experienced such times in his life when he was participating in worship at the Tabernacle or in the Temple. The historical accounts of a cloud of the shekinah glory descending and filling the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem would create a sense of awe for those who came near the Tabernacle or the Temple.

The author of this psalm had been displaced from the Tabernacle or the Temple and consequently was concerned about being removed from where God was. The general thought of the Israelites was that God was in the Holy of Holies. They would probably have given a testimony that they could sense the presence of God as they came near to that place. We could make a valid argument that God was indeed above the Mercy Seat as well as everywhere else. However, the fact that His presence was sensed in a stronger way close to the Tabernacle is something that we can appreciate. We may not understand what was happening but we may have experienced something similar to that.

Wherever the psalmist was at the time he wrote this song, he was not able to sense the presence of God which he not only desired but needed. The need was like a thirst that kept growing in its intensity and could only be satisfied by "coming into God's presence." This thirst was coming from deep within himself (his soul) so that he knew "something was missing." That "something" was likely a sense of well being that he experienced when he had participated in the times of worship at the house of God. Apparently, he was experiencing the opposite of a "sense of well being" even to the point of despondency and tears. However, the tears did nothing to satisfy his "spiritual thirst."

It did not help that in addition to being away from home or where God resided, he was physically in the presence of those who taunted him with words of ridicule and expressions designed to produce doubt in his mind. The taunt of "where is your God now?" was obviously coming from pagan "non-believers." Such ridicule is natural for those who are the enemies of God and God's people. We long for restoration when the problems of this life press in upon us to such an extent that others may cause us to wonder if God cares about us.

In his intense melancholy, he could remember how "it used to be" and that intensified the yearning and his desire to experience God's presence again. The high and holy days of religious festivals were times when people sensed the presence of God. It was a time of joy and filled the participants with awe and wonder.

Drowning – 42:5-8

⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him *For* the help of His presence. ⁶ O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me. ⁸ The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life. Psalm 42:5-8 (NASB95)

We see that the range of emotions the psalmist was experiencing went from intense thirst

for the presence of God to being flooded or overwhelmed with despair. There is a line in the *Ancient Mariner* that reads “Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.” Being isolated in a foreign land and unable to go back to the safety of his homeland and the presence of God felt like being stranded in the middle of the ocean and being tossed around by its waves. That would produce a feeling of hopelessness. Most of us have experienced periods of emotional lows. We may have feelings of anxiety and have no rational reason for such feelings.

When we realize that we have become despondent, it is time to get some help. As it turns out, this may be a situation in which we can help ourselves. If we know the truth and are aware of the promises of God and have faith in Him, then we can literally “talk to ourselves” and provide counsel by using truth and logic to overcome the emotions that seem to be in control of our feelings.

The psalmists carried on a conversation with himself. He started with a question: “Why are you so agitated and despondent?” We could follow that question with a series of questions that declare the truth of the situation. “Do you not know that God is in control?” “Do you not remember all that God has already done for Israel (the land that was bordered by the Jordan in the east, by Mt. Hermon to the north and the little hill in the south)?” “Is not God in control of the waves and the waterspouts and the situation in which you find yourself?” “Doesn’t God’s very character (that He is good) give you hope day and night that He will be there for you?”

The best antidote for such “lows” is to praise the Lord as we recall His works of the past in our lives. Such remembering helps our faith and causes us to focus on Him rather than on ourselves or the present situation in which we find ourselves.

The last part of verse eight “A prayer to the God of my life” should probably be a part of or an introduction to verse nine which is the beginning of the second stanza of this song. As we will see, the second part almost seems to be parallel to the first stanza.

Crushed – 42:9-11

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 shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, While they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” ¹¹ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God. Psalm 42:9-11 (NASB95)

This prayer may have been an effort of the psalmist to gain understanding of why he was going through the situation in which he found himself. Previously, he had questioned himself with regard to his response to being away from his homeland and not being able to enjoy the sense of well being that was associated with those familiar surroundings that pointed toward God’s presence among His people. Now, his questions are directed toward God.

When it seems that God is not there for us, it is a good thing to look for reasons why. It could be that God is trying to teach us something or to bring us to a point of realizing how much we really need Him. If this psalmist was among those in exile in Babylon, then the “why” they were in their situation had national implications and lessons to be learned about how important being true to God was for them.

The second question in verse nine was with regard to his response to oppression and persecution. Let’s examine the question “Why should we be sad (or mourn) when others deliberately try to harm us?” We could argue that such a response is a “natural reaction.” However, in light of the truth we know from Roman 8:28 that “all things work together for good to those who love the Lord,” then we should be thinking more in terms of looking past the abuse to the final outcome of being transformed into the image of Christ who is our salvation.

We can certainly learn from what Jesus did. In speaking of the cross, we read (Hebrews

12:2) “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” While we would despise and not encourage nor hope for such persecution, our response should certainly not be sadness but joy. Part of the abuse that Jesus endured were the insults and the questioning of whether God would help Him while He was on the cross.

As we are going through trials in our lives, we may sometimes think that God is a million miles away and we might get a sense of despair or hopelessness. When we have such times of troubles and doubts, then we need to “talk to ourselves” and bring to our memory the promises of God on which our hope is based. Knowing that God is not a million miles away but is with us and in us and will never forsake us, then we can legitimately ask ourselves “why would we ever have feelings of despair or be disturbed regardless of what is happening around us?”

The ultimate answer for anyone who is experiencing “low times” in their life is what the psalmist discovered – “Put your hope in God.” We may be encouraged when we look at the description of God used in this psalm in verse five and verse 11. Some older translations read “the help (or health) of my countenance (and my God).” The Septuagint and some of the newer translations use the word “salvation” rather than help or health. The Hebrew word is y@shuw’ah which is pronounced “yesh-oo’aw.” A transliteration of that Hebrew word into English would simply be Jesus.