



PSALMS

The Prayer Book of the Bible

Trusting God No Matter What Comes My Way

Psalm 42 and Psalm 43

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First Presbyterian Church - Colorado Springs, CO

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Today we switch gears in our summer series on the Psalms and move from Praise to Lament. These are the biblical version of "The Blues." Imagine someone excitedly saying, "I sure am feeling the blues!!" No way. Instead he/she expresses it with discouraging attitudes. We all get in those times and it's important that we not get stuck there and wallow in self-misery and defeat. None of us wants to be known as a negative person or even be considered a part of a group of negative/whining people. Most of us want to look at life through positive lenses so we dig deep within as well as look to experts for help and advice. In preparation for this sermon, I recently went to my local Barnes and Noble bookstore to check out the "self improvement" section. I discovered that there were over 1,000 titles of self-help books. Our society seems obsessed with getting answers to life's problems from almost any source.

The Bible is full of stories that are uplifting and encouraging. Psalms and Proverbs are particularly helpful in this regard. We've seen over the past few weeks that when one zeroes in on praise to God, a by-product is an uplifted spirit within. Focusing on the "positive" is definitely an attribute of the mature Christian. On the other hand, it is very important that we can admit our anxieties, fears, concerns and deal with the issues of life honestly, openly and directly. The biblical laments are wonderful models to us of expressing our personal "blues" at the same time showing us how to be positive about life and offer praise to God. Good mental health and good theology do not sweep 'negatives' or difficult times under the carpet. However, some of us may wonder if it's OK to express our doubts, frustrations and negative feelings to God. We wonder, "Will it make God angry?" Is it even OK to get mad at God – maybe it's sacrilegious or blasphemous.

Laments express the honest reflections of God's people, both individual and corporate. Before "reality T.V." there were laments and these are "really real." The authors look at life and see things as cockeyed and disoriented. "This isn't the way it's supposed to be, God!" cries the one offering the lament. "I thought we were your people whom you love and care about!" If we truly understand what Jim taught us in the series on the Lord's Prayer, that God is our loving Father, then we know how much He desires that we be honest with him. As we saw in our Call to Worship, God knows our thoughts even before we can verbalize them. We complain to God not to inform him, but to be real with him. Ours is a relationship built on trust and being real.

My wife and I believe that any healthy marriage will have conflict and it's unrealistic to think it won't. God created us as unique individuals so it's just natural we would see things in different ways. This is true in any good relationship – parent to child, friend to friend. Healthy conflict resolution happens when one person feels free enough to express him/herself honestly and seek resolution. Often this conflict involves an action or attitude the other has done or didn't do. The important thing is to be honest and open. "You tell me you care and want to act in a loving manner, but _____ is really upsetting to me. This action/behavior doesn't demonstrate love & care. I expected much more. Help me understand what you were thinking." Healthy conflict resolution does not come from one person claiming to be the "boss" and the other person's capitulation. It comes from honest expressions of our thoughts and feelings. If we can enter conflict with the attitude of learning rather than of protection of my rights, then resolution is much more possible. "Why in the world does she see this situation as she does? I see things the opposite way." Through honest expression, we can usually come to an appreciation of the other's perspective and are better able to grow.

Lamenting or complaining to God is like that, and our laments are important to God. Avoidance is based on fear, anxiety and confusion. So lamenting before God is an essential part of our relationship with Him though we don't want to remain stuck there. We complain to God not to inform him of our situation, but so we can be in a better position to learn from God's perspective. State your complaint, then wait and listen as God uses others to teach us.

In the case of laments of Psalms 42 & 43, most scholars agree they should be taken as one unit. The author was unknown though probably the same person. In Psalm 42 he offers his thoughts to the director of music for temple worship. It's like Jim Singleton doing some reflective writing and then giving it to Jim DeJarnette to add music and find the appropriate place for its use. In fact as you know, this happens all the time in our church. The song we sang about the deer panting after water is another expression of Psalms set to beautiful music.

The Psalmist wanders in the wilderness and feels like God doesn't care or isn't listening and the Psalmist expresses frustration with God. The Psalmist has an enemy who has surrounded him and he feels oppressed. He calls out "Why have you forgotten me? My foes taunt me and I am suffering. Where are you God? Right now, my very tears have become my food." The implication is that as one of God's people, he shouldn't have to suffer like this and he feels like God doesn't care. While we may not have a person who is our enemy or who is stalking us, most of us do struggle with various "enemies" throughout our lifetime. We have so much to learn from this Psalm of lament and others. My enemy the last two years has been cancer. I've had it now for two years and this fall I'm having a stem cell transplant using my own stem cells. This procedure is going to be difficult and isolating. My attitudes have run the gamut: praying earnestly for healing, working at welcoming these trials as friends (as James 1 advises us), etc. But, lately my prayers have been laments and I've struggled with what was good for me to say to God. I've found myself praying/complaining like this: "God, this isn't fair and I want to remind you that it doesn't make any sense. Just think of all the great ministry work I could be doing if you'd take this away. You made me a strong extrovert. I like to speak and tell others about you. This is unreasonable and I know you're a God of reason." In my head I know that God's ways are not our ways. I understand the value of suffering in one's life. But understanding things intellectually and theologically are frequently not on the same page as dealing with things emotionally.

What/Who is your enemy? What complaints/laments do you register with God? If you haven't yet, then I encourage you to be honest with yourself and with God. Our enemies could be a failed relationship, economic collapse, an unfair boss, a rebellious child, an unreasonable parent, physical problems, loss of a loved one, loneliness, and on and on. It's important to identify our complaints/enemies and deal with God in a straight-forward manner.

As I've spent a lot of time with these two Psalms and studied more, I've also noticed that most of the biblical laments are not just complaints but offerings of Praise to God as well. God wants us to know that He understands when we cry out against him in our frustration or desperation, but He also desires that we have such a strong relationship with Him that we will recognize our dependence on Him. Praise in the midst of lamenting is our refusal to be stuck in despair. Our praise keeps us from becoming negative people. Our praise is a healthy way of moving on and upward. Who are we apart from God? What would the situation be like without Him? He is the one to whom we turn. When people were abandoning Jesus because his teaching was too difficult to follow (Jn 6:68), Jesus asked the twelve, "You don't want to leave too, do you?" In one of his finest hours, Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the very words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." To whom else should we go today?

In the midst of his feelings of abandonment and frustration with God, the speaker begins his lament by expressing, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you, Oh God." This Psalm is such a model for us! Gael Wallace captures that image so beautifully in her painting. The Psalmist realizes that God is present even in the midst of our anguish. We may have questions about God's lack of intervention or whether or not God caused, allowed, stood by or just watched as all this happened. But, the Psalmist also realized that God is the only one who could quench spiritual thirst. The Psalmist's heart was panting for God - for the deep (though presently stressed) relationship.

I struggle with this phrase - panting/longing after God. So many around us want to tell us what this longing for God should look like. When I listen to them, I end up with lots of "should" and "have to's" in my life. For me, I have to deal with what it is that quenches my thirsty soul. For me it's a process of visualizing walking/talking with God in true intimacy - laughing, touching, crying, working, caring, learning how he thinks, etc. I always cry when I hear/sing the song, "I Can Only Imagine." The lyrics articulate beautifully my own imagining of what it will be like to stand in the presence of Jesus in heaven. Will I dance with joy? Fall to my knees in awe? Ask questions? Sing/shout or be silent? Like the song writer, "I don't know." I do know that Jesus walks with me here and now. I long to become deeply aware of his presence in my daily life. It's what I desire more than anything else - being so in love with Jesus that I walk with him through any/all things in life. I pant after, desire, long for, and claim that deep walk with Him. In what ways do you thirst after God? How do you get refreshed by God? What stands in the way of your coming down from the dry hills of life's laments and drinking/frolicking in the refreshing waters of God's love for you? Are you passionately in love with Jesus?

For me, it appears that God is taking me into the wilderness while I get treatment. I thought about my impending wilderness - being in isolation in the hospital. Extroverts don't like being alone. These two Psalms repeat the same phrase three times, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Ps 42:5, 11, Ps.43:5) Laments are the expressions of those who realize that life is a journey complete with times of feeling alone, feeling like God has given up on us, and yet we're strangely drawn to his wonderful presence. It's good to realize that God desires what is good for us.