

# BaptistWay Bible Series for September 24: Longing to be in the presence of God

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### Longing to be in the presence of God

- Psalms 42-43

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A few weeks ago, my wife and I drove 2,000 miles to leave our second child, our “baby girl,” for her first year at college—nearly four years to the day that we dropped off her older brother for his freshman year.

Dad did fine until the moment came to say good-bye on the sidewalk outside her dorm. The tears came as I wrapped my arms around Meredith and told her how proud I was of her and how very much I was going to miss her. And then I cried a few more tears as Melanie held her close and through her own tears whispered to Meredith the blessing from Numbers that she had so often shared with her at bedtime: “The Lord bless you and keep you ... .”

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But the real ache came a few minutes later on our way to a nearby restaurant for our first dinner as official “empty nesters.” As I drove, I literally could feel the dull ache in my chest, the kind of pain that comes from a hole in your heart created by the absence of someone you love more than life itself.

When I read the opening verse of Psalm 42 in preparation for this lesson, I had a new appreciation for the psalmist’s ache for God: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God” (v. 1).

This time, however, my tears were ones of regret, for I had to confess to the God I love that I have all too rarely experienced the depth of a “heartache” for God as intimate and real as the pain I felt that night outside Boston.

### **Longing for God**

In his Confessions, Augustine famously wrote, “God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.” Augustine described his search for genuine love that ultimately led him to God, concluding that “my real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul. I was not aware of this hunger.”

The writer of Psalms 42-43, which likely were composed as a single poem,

used similar language, but with one important distinction. The psalmist is not a seeker, searching for meaning and purpose in life, who finds God.

The writer is a believer, a person who has experienced a life-giving relationship with God: “By day, the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me” (v. 8), and “I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy” (43:4). He is a worship leader who has experienced the joy of leading others in the worship of God (“I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,” 42:4).

Because of these experiences, the poet-singer longs for God’s presence with a yearning as deep as the deer that searches for life-giving water (v. 1).

We can only guess at the circumstances that may have led to the psalmist’s plight. Some have surmised he is suffering from a debilitating illness from which he has received no relief despite his appeals to God. Regardless, as our own experience affirms, physical pain and spiritual pain often are intermingled, with one impacting the other.

### **Remembering God’s presence**

While Augustine has been credited as perhaps the first truly “self-aware” person in all of literature, he certainly had some earlier soul mates in the psalmists of Hebrew Scripture. This psalmist is experiencing profound spiritual anguish borne in the pain of God’s apparent absence. Indeed, as some of the great Christian mystics have reminded us through the centuries, the pain of God’s seeming abandonment is in a profound sense intensified by the contrast of knowing the loving intimacy of God’s presence (see comments on the lament of Psalm 22 in lesson 2).

As with some of the other laments in the Psalter, the writer's agony is magnified by the presence of his adversaries who deride his faith with taunts of "Where is your God?" (42:3 and repeated in 42:10). For this reason, the poet longs not only for God's renewed presence, but also for vindication and deliverance from his enemies (43:1). For him, God's deliverance is not only a matter of faith but of justice.

Amid the roller coaster ride of trust and despair—the affirmation of "hope in God" versus the lament of "Why have you forgotten me?"—the psalmist finds secure footing in the reassuring and healing power of God's gift of memory. He recalls the joy of worship (42:4) and the experiences of God's "steadfast love" (v. 8) and guiding light (v. 3) that have led and sustained him.

When tragedy or pain or sorrow cause our knees to buckle and our stomachs to jump into our throats, we turn to memories of those times when God has proven faithful, both in our personal experience and in the lives of those who have gone before us. With the psalmist, we sing, "These things I remember!" (v. 4) and affirm the three-fold refrain: "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (vv. 5, 11; and 43:5).

Finally, in those times when we, like the psalmist, feel God's absence even as we long for God's presence, perhaps we would do well to remember another line from Augustine that also seems to express the sentiment of the psalmist: "God is more truly imagined than expressed, and he exists more truly than he is imagined."

### **Discussion questions**

- What actions or spiritual practices would help cultivate the kind of intimate relationship with God and longing for God's presence described by the psalmist?

- In what ways can you identify with the psalmist's "roller coaster ride of trust and despair"?
- Can you recall difficult times when the memory of God's faithfulness and steadfast love gave you comfort and hope?



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