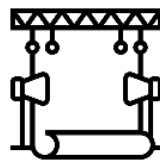


Longing to be in the presence of God - A Devotion about Psalm 42



How to use this devotion

Welcome to this devotional. We trust that it will be a blessing to you. We have provided some written context for the Psalm, which will allow us to step into the shoes of its writers for a moment and then personalize those events. Once you have a better understanding of the context, you can fill in the blanks with your own experiences. Let's get started. This time, we will be quoting from the Amplified Bible.



Backdrop

This backdrop provides essential background information necessary to understand the context of this Psalm.

Who Wrote the Psalms?

David is known for writing most of the Psalms, but there were other authors as well. The descendants of the Korahites wrote a total of 25 Psalms, including Psalm 42 and ten others. Solomon wrote one Psalm, Moses wrote one, and 50 of the Psalms have unknown authors. David is credited with 73 Psalms and may have written several of the 50 whose authorship is unclear.

Who Were the Korahites?

Historians suggest that the authors of the Psalms attributed to the Korahites were likely descendants of Korah rather than his immediate sons. But who was Korah? The Bible references three individuals with this name. According to historians, the Korahites who wrote the Psalms were probably descended from the third Korah mentioned in the Bible. In Numbers 16, we learn that he was the son of Izhar, who was the son of Kohath, who was the son of Levi; therefore, he was a Levite. It follows that the descendants of Korah who authored the Psalms belonged to the Levitical tribe, which was responsible for duties in the Tabernacle and later, the Temple.

The Korah Rebellion

This is a popular topic for Old Testament sermons. The entire story can be found in Numbers 16. Korah challenged Moses regarding the priestly duties. Along with Dathan and Abiram from the Reubenite tribe, as well as 250 community leaders, he revolted against Moses. They were unhappy with their responsibilities, which they felt were limited to lesser duties around the Tabernacle. They specifically challenged Moses for the right to perform certain priestly duties, particularly burning incense. Moses refused to comply and, after consulting God, challenged the rebels to return the following day. Each of the 250 leaders was to bring his own firepan. While Moses knew the outcome that awaited them, Korah was

unaware of what was coming.

Korah likely anticipated in-service trying for the 250 men, seeing that they all had to come ready with a firepan. Instead, the anger of God consumed them. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their families were swallowed by the earth, possibly a sinkhole. The remainder of their 250 followers were consumed by a fire from heaven and only their firepans survived. These firepans were collected and beaten by the priest into sheets with which they covered the ark, as a stark reminder to the Israelites! One can only imagine the utter disbelief, shock, and fear on the faces of the Israelites witnessing the event. It is a good script for a movie.

But even that was not enough of a lesson and soon after that, the Israelites revolted against Moses again. Can one believe it? Moses consulted God and once again the anger of God came down on the people. This time in the form of a plaque that appeared overnight and killed 14700 people. There is much more interesting detail to this story, for instance how Moses prevented God's total wrath, but what is important for our devotion is to know that despite Korah's rebellion, Korah's lineage continues according to Numbers 26:11. Some of his relatives must have been spared the wrath of God, and we encounter them in the Psalms again.

Korah's Lineage

In the Book of Psalms, we find not only the unnamed descendants of Korah but also prominent figures like Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. Heman authored Psalm 88, Asaph contributed to 12 Psalms, and Ethan was the writer of Psalm 89. Psalm 42, which is the focus of our devotion, is one of the 11 Psalms written by the unnamed Korahites. Understanding the backgrounds of Heman, Asaph, and Ethan can provide valuable insights into the role of these Korahites. Therefore, let us take a brief look at the lives of Heman, Asaph, and Ethan to gain a deeper understanding of Psalm 42.



The Musicians in the House of the Lord that authored Psalms

"They ministered with song in front of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting until Solomon built the LORD's temple in Jerusalem, and they performed their task according to the regulations given to them". - 1 Chronicles 6: 32

Heman

The book of 1 Chronicles provides more background on the lineages, duties, and skills of the musicians responsible for the tabernacle and later the temple. In Chapter 6, we learn more about Heman, the author of Psalm 88. He was one of the musicians assigned by David for duties at the tabernacle. It is interesting to note that a detailed genealogy of Heman covers more than 20 generations, clearly highlighting his Levitical lineage.

In Chapter 15, we read further about his specific duties. Heman, Asaph, and Ethan were responsible for sounding the bronze cymbals. Additionally, in Chapter 25, David also assigned Heman's sons for service, entrusting them with the responsibility of prophesying to the Lord using harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals.

Asaph

We do not have a detailed lineage of Asaph, except for the fact that his father was Berechiah, a doorkeeper at the tabernacle (1 Chronicles 15:17). Asaph was appointed by David as the chief of the musicians, responsible for playing the bronze cymbals (1 Chronicles 16:5). Along with the other musicians, he was tasked with ministering before the Ark daily (1 Chronicles 16:37). His duties also included being part of the glorious procession that brought the Ark to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 15:19).

It is reasonable to assume that Asaph was not only a good leader but also a skilled musician. Playing the cymbals required someone who could maintain the rhythm and pace for the other musicians, especially amid the noise of a large procession. This would have demanded strong arms, sturdy sandals for walking, and a great deal of endurance. Given this context, it's clear why Asaph was the author of twelve Psalms.

Ethan

We don't learn much about Ethan from the book of 1 Chronicles. He was the son of Kushaiah, about whom we also have limited information (1 Chron 15:17). Along with Asaph and Heman, Ethan was responsible for playing the cymbals (1 Chron 15:19). He is also the author of the lengthy Psalm 89, which reveals a bit more about him. Together, Ethan, Asaph, and Heman must have formed a formidable musical team, as their names are often mentioned together. One can imagine that they were good friends who spent a lot of time practicing their musical skills. It is fitting that between them, they authored 14 of the Psalms. This brings us to the topic of our devotion: Psalm 42. Let's dive into it.



Psalm 42

The authors of Psalm 42 are not definitively known. It may have been written by one of three individuals or by other unknown descendants of Korah. The available evidence supports the idea that it was composed by Korahite musicians. While some historians believe that David may have written this Psalm, there is more uncertainty than certainty regarding this claim. For our purposes, we will assume it was written by one or more of the Korahites, who were musicians assigned by King David to perform duties at the tabernacle and later at the temple.

Intro

To the Chief Musician. A skillful song, *ora* a didactic *or* reflective poem, of the sons of Korah.

Some translations use the term "Maskil" (or "Mashcil") to describe the format of the Psalm. It is understood to be a song or poem that was performed with a melody, which may have indicated the instruments used during its singing. Given that the Korahites were skilled musicians known for their brass instruments, trumpets, and tambourines, this Psalm was likely sung in a very loud and lively manner, or performed as a poem accompanied by significant noise.



Verses 1-4

The songwriters provide the background here for the reason for writing the Psalm. They were longing to be in the presence of God, while not being able to do so.

¹ As the deer pants [longingly] for the water brooks, So my soul pants [longingly] for You, O God. ² My soul (my life, my inner self) thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see the face of God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ⁴ These things I [vividly] remember as I pour out my soul; How I used to go along before the great crowd of people and lead them in procession to the house of God [like a choirmaster before his singers, timing the steps to the music and the chant of the song], With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a great crowd keeping a festival.

Reflection

Verses one and two of this Psalm have inspired countless songs and choruses written over many years and in many languages, contributing to its fame. The songwriters expressed their deep longing for God's presence, likening it to a thirsty deer desperately seeking water. They wept day and night, to the point where their tears became the nourishment for their souls. They reminisced about the joyous processions to the house of God, the Tabernacle, and the immense happiness that accompanied those gatherings. Although they do not elaborate on the reasons for their current separation from this experience, it is clear that they deeply miss it.

Questions for Reflection

Was there ever a time when you yearned for the Lord's presence like a thirsty deer longs for water? When did that happen? Where were you? Are you feeling that longing now? Can you remember instances when you, alongside others, experienced the Lord's presence so deeply that it brought you to tears, wishing you could feel it again?



Verses 5-6

The songwriters continued the song by questioning their inner self, which was in turmoil. Without hesitation, they provided a clue for finding smoother waters. One can almost hear them cautioning themselves.

⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become restless *and* disturbed within me? Hope in God *and* wait expectantly for Him, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence. ⁶ O my God, my soul is in despair within me [the burden more than I can bear]; Therefore I will [fervently] remember You from the land of the Jordan And the peaks of [Mount] Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the [thundering] sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.



Reflection

Their souls are in despair, restless, and disturbed. They struggle to endure these feelings. One can sense their lack of hope, peace, and calmness of spirit. They remember the places where they felt the presence of God, such as the Jordan River and the peaks of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in their homeland, capped with snow and the source of raging streams. They recall the noisy and turbulent waterfalls that cascade from there with such intensity, as if they were washing over them. Yet, in the same breath, they remind themselves to be patient and to wait on God.

Questions for Personal Reflection

Can you recall a time when your soul was in despair, restless, and disturbed? Were there moments when it felt like water was rushing over you? Can you remember those experiences? Do you find it difficult to wait patiently on God?



Verses 8-10

The songwriters, fortunately, do not succumb to their despair. A glimmer of hope in their faith begins to emerge, but it comes with a few questions for the God in their lives. There is a sense of impatience in their tone.

⁸ Yet the LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song will be with me, A prayer to the God of my life. 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 crushing of my bones [with a sword], my adversaries taunt me, While they say continually to me, "Where is your God?"

Reflection

The songwriters understood that the lovingkindness of their God would once again fill their days and bring them songs of prayer at night. However, at present, they bear the heavy burden of being separated from God's presence. Their adversaries added to this burden, making it feel as though their bones were being crushed by a sword. There was no easy path leading them back into the presence of God. The reasons for their situation remain unclear; perhaps they were on a distant journey, held in captivity, or ostracized by their people.

Questions for Personal Reflection

Have you lately felt forsaken by God? Have you perhaps asked Him why He has forsaken you? Did you get any answers to your question? Are you in despair?

Verse 11

¹¹ Why are you in despair, O my soul? Why have you become restless *and* disquieted within me? Hope in God *and* wait expectantly for Him, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

Reflection

This brief Psalm concludes with the same question it began with. The writers reflect on their restless souls and encourage themselves with the reminder that there will come a time when they will be able to praise Him once again.

Final Take

Reading the Psalm, or song, one can almost sense the rhythm that exists between the high, fast notes of a chorus and the slow, low notes of the verses. The absence of being in God's presence adds depth to the verses and highlights the hope expressed in the choruses.

The Tabernacle, the ark, and the temple were the places where worship was offered, celebrating His existence, proximity, and loving-kindness. For reasons unknown, the songwriters found themselves unable to be with others who worshipped the God of their lives. They bore the heavy burden of being deprived of this experience, and one can only imagine how heavy that weight was.

Nevertheless, they held on to the belief that a time would come when they would be able to gather in a place to experience the presence of God once more, alongside others. They envisioned joyously playing bronze cymbals, their muscles glistening with sweat in the hot sun as they marched through the dirt. What a vibrant expression of joy that would be! They must have surely missed it!

Personal Take

We are very fortunate that we do not have to journey to a tabernacle or temple to experience the presence of God; we can encounter Him every day and night through His Spirit. However, like the songwriters, we often go through difficult times when we feel distant from God's presence. This feeling is normal, and we don't need to feel guilty about it. We were created for fellowship with God, and when we struggle to "connect", our spirits, like those of the songwriters, can become troubled. This is a good sign. This devotion is not about how to "get back into" the presence of God; rather, it reminds us that such feelings are temporary. There is hope, and we can and will return to a place where we can experience God's presence again.

Word of Encouragement

I want to encourage you to return to that place as soon as possible if you are not there now. If you can't do it alone, ask others for help and to pray for you. Don't leave things as they are. God is faithful, and when we call on His name, as the songwriters do, He will help us and allow us to return to a state where we can joyfully express ourselves, whatever that may be. Hold onto your "cymbal", and as you re-enter God's presence, make sure that He can hear and see your joy!

Thank you for journeying with us through this devotion.



Something More About Cymbals

Cymbals used during Biblical times were very different from those used today, a difference that is understandable given the technological advancements since then. Today, hand-played cymbals are commonly known as crash cymbals, aptly named for their loud, explosive sound. In orchestras, various other types of cymbals, such as splash cymbals, china cymbals, bells, and hi-hats, are played with wooden sticks. Each type has its unique function and sound. These kinds of cymbals were developed much later, as technology allowed for the refinement, flattening, and shaping of different metals.

In ancient times, all musical instruments were crafted by hand. For cymbals, bronze had to be melted into chunks, forged by hand into specific shapes, and then meticulously finished by hand to achieve their final form. This process was dirty, labor-intensive, and demanding. Compared to today's cymbals, those used by groups such as the Korahites were smaller in diameter but likely thicker and heavier. Archaeological excavations have uncovered two basic types of cymbals: the smaller ones, ranging from 3 to 6 centimeters in diameter, and the larger ones, from 8 to 12 centimeters.

When looking at these ancient cymbals, it is hard to imagine they produced a sound comparable to modern cymbals. Their pitch was likely much lower, producing more of a 'clap' or 'clank' sound. Consequently, a larger number of cymbal players would have been needed to create an audible impact amidst the noise from other instruments. Musicians responsible for playing the cymbals had to be physically strong and fit, as striking them together for extended periods required considerable stamina.

In Hebrew texts, two different words are used for cymbals: *tseltselim* and *metsiltayim*, both derived from the same Hebrew root, *tsala*, meaning to quiver, cause vibration, or tinkle. The smaller cymbals likely functioned as finger cymbals, producing a high-pitched tinkle, while the larger ones probably created a lower-pitched sound. One can only imagine how that tinkle must have resonated! The joy of being part of a musical procession would have stemmed from the combined effects of the cymbals, shofars (horns), trumpets, harps, lyres, and tambourines. Coupled with the crowd shouting at the top of their lungs, it must have been an unforgettable experience that could result in temporary hearing loss for a day or two. It's no wonder the writers of Psalm 42 longed for such moments!

Thank you for joining this devotion!



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