

Sunday October 15, 2023

Lesson 6: Whose Voice Do You Hear?

Scripture: Psalm 42

**Context:**

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” The second unit is titled “Living Water,” with several lessons of how God’s providence comes in the form of water, a simultaneous chaotic and replenishing element. Today’s lesson comes from the book of Psalms, ancient poetry to remind us of how God is at work in our journey of faith. The focus of today’s lesson will be to discover how God refreshes our souls.

As a form of ancient poetry, the book of Psalms can be read in several ways. They are both scripture and liturgy, as well as poetry of an ancient culture.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Book of Psalms, there are personal cries for deliverance, as well as hymns of thanksgiving for all which God has done in the lives of those who call upon God’s name. Psalm 42 contains both of these elements as the psalmist names a prayer for the need of human life that the living God bestows, revives, and preserves.<sup>2</sup> The main theme of the psalm is how all life depends on God.

To set the psalm up with its main point, the psalmist gives an image of a deer panting for water. The powerful image of thirst is rich as it expresses the frustrated and compelling demand of when the body needs hydration; the body cannot live without water.<sup>3</sup> In the same way, the body needs water to survive, the soul needs the Lord. And thus, the psalmist moves the psalm to name the importance of God in one’s life.

As we read the psalm, we see they are in dialogue with adversaries who ask the question: “Where is your God?” (42:3,10). The question is a formulaic motif used to characterize the situation in which those who trust in the Lord are put to shame in the presence of others because of some trouble that calls their faith into question.<sup>4</sup> There is a thirst for God to refresh and refuel the people as they face troubles. The lines and their similarities to other psalms suggest the psalm was composed for a representative individual who speaks with and for a group in the troubled times of the postexilic period when the faithful were at the mercy of other peoples in whose midst they had to live.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note some of the language used in Psalm 42 is later used in the passion of Jesus, who speaks of his own downcast, disquieted soul.<sup>6</sup> Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Mays, James L. “Psalms,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

teaches us the natural elements to come with our souls thirsting for only the water the Lord can give.

### **Application**

I will never forget going for a morning run one day and just as the sun was beginning to rise, I saw a group of deer dash in front of the field ahead of me. While I suspected they were more concerned for the enthusiastic runner who appeared out of nowhere with his neon-lit vest, I also like to imagine they were headed for the pond which was nearby. There was something so beautiful to watching them run through the field and imagine them finding a place to be safe and feel refreshed.

Much like the psalm we read today, we all need places to feel safe and to be nourished. For those of us in the Christian faith, our souls thirst for God, the one who fills us and replenishes our souls. It is God who is the one who satisfies us, not the powers and principalities of this world. And it is the Lord God who will remind us of our worth and when our adversaries taunt or deride us, it will be God who will fill us with hope once again.

As we read Psalm 42, I would imagine all of us, if honest, have had some type of season like our writer. We have all had seasons where we feel blocked or belittled, remembering more wondrous days of before where we were happy and secure, shouting and singing for joy. We remember sacred places and times, seasons where we could name tangibly where God was at work within our lives. There is thanksgiving for what God has done.

And yet now we look and ask if God has forgotten us. We see enemies all around us who mock us, asking “Where is your God?” We experience distress and disorientation within us. It is then we name how our soul is disquieted. And it is then we name our hope comes in God, the one who we trust and place our hope in as the replenisher of our souls.

The beauty of the psalms is they help us name those ancient experience as part of our reality. Like our ancestors before us, they name the pain and distress of this life. And like before, God names how hope comes to the weary soul.

In my morning prayer time, I am always grateful for how my devotion contains one of the psalms. While the other portions of the Bible encourage and challenge me, it is most often the psalms which lay out the innermost portions of my soul. As I read the words, I am reminded I am not alone as the voices of the ancients join with me in naming both pain and thanksgiving.

A few years ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend an Academy of Spiritual Formation with an emphasis on the Book of Psalms. Fortunately for me, the conference was at Camp Sumatanga, a place which meant a great deal to me during my college years. I was at a place where my soul had been nourished and filled, and would be again that week.

One of the things we learned at this retreat was to take the Psalms and play a game of “fill in the blank.” You would start off with the beginning of the psalms and then perhaps fill in the blank with both the thanksgivings and then the adversaries. When I did this at camp, one of my safe places, I found my soul being lifted and I felt the Lord God reminding me I was not alone or defeated. The Lord was with me, refreshing my soul.

If you do this exercise with Psalm 42, you will find a word of hope with whatever you face. It is as if naming both the sacred places as well as the adversaries and placing them next to God reminds you of how God has not forsaken or abandoned you. One is reminded of how God

refreshes our souls and is ever near us in whatever season or place in life we find ourselves. It can work with any psalm and I hope in whatever season of life you find yourself in, you might see how God speaks through ancient poetry to remind you God is not done with you yet.

How have you felt God refresh your soul? Where are the places you feel God replenishing your soul? How have psalms helped you on your journey of faith? Why do you think God seeks ways to fill us up? How can both good and bad seasons of life be opportunities for us to seek refreshment or support from the Lord?

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