

Where is Your God?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 42/43

I don't know if you can relate to that refrain we just said together three times, but I can. I can say it for that little boy I know so well and love so much. I'll never forget the sight of him standing there in the outfield. He was so happy to be on the All-Star team. But the game had not gone well for him on the pitching mound. And now he stood in right field, his shoulders slumped, his head hanging, tears sliding down his cheeks. His young world had come to an end and he was the picture of dejection. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" And I wanted to shout, "Put your hope in God, for you will yet praise him, your Savior and your God."

Psalm 42/43 is full of that kind of inconsolable dejection. We don't know the exact situation that brought on this slumping of the soul. Many scholars think this was written about and for the Jews after their return from Exile, when they found their land devastated, their temple in ruins, and their enemies mocking them. "Where is your God now, O Jew?" I'm guessing that some of the Jews were asking that same question. After their utter defeat, they were asking, "Where is our God?"

Verse 4 recalls a time when they had gone up to the house of God with the thronging worshipers, sort of like church on Easter Sunday, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving. It was a festive throng that made it easy to believe in the living God. But that was all just a memory now, and their enemies said, "Where is your God, now that your temple is torn down?"

And they could remember those times when the beauty of nature simply overwhelmed them with a sense of God's presence. Verse 6 mentions Mount Hermon which is to the north of Israel. It is nearly 10000 feet tall, snow covered almost the whole year. It is the source of the Jordan River, where roaring waterfalls and deep caves produce echoes of God's majesty. But a walk in the woods or a hike in the mountains could not restore that sense of God's presence now. All they had was the memory, and the echoes of their enemies mocking, "Where is your God now that your land is a barren mess?"

No wonder their souls were downcast and their spirits disturbed. And it's no wonder our world is filled with people who feel the same way. Where is God in this world? When we see mudslides wash away homes and take 20 lives, when we see wildfires consume hundreds of miles of forest and devastate the lives of thousands, when we see hurricanes and floods leave whole cities in ruins for years, we ask where is God? When we see racial strife divide our country, when we see thousands of Christians persecuted in the Middle East and in China, when we see refugees straggling across Europe after their homes are destroyed by ISIS, we ask where is God?

With the Psalmist we say, "As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" It's a powerful picture—a deer pursued by hunters, running for its life, gasping for breath and panting for water. As our bodies absolutely need water, so our souls absolutely need God. The human race is dying of thirst for the living God, but most don't know it. Indeed, many have given up on God, like the Jews in Elie Wiesel's terrible story, "Night".

Wiesel was a survivor of the Holocaust in which 6 million Jews were killed by the Nazis in World War II. Wiesel describes the horror of the death camps in the dark little book, "Night". In the most horrible scene, the sadistic camp commander wants to kill the spirit of the prisoners once and for all. So he takes a boy, a little boy, and hangs him in front of the whole camp. As the horrified Jews stare at that gruesome sight, a voice cries, "Where is God?" And another voice shouts, "He's right up there," pointing at the little boy. The message? "God is dead, like that boy." As a result of the Holocaust, millions of Jews and Gentiles, too, stopped believing in God. The unfathomable suffering of the War proved it. God is dead.

No, he is not, says the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God is very much alive and we can tell you where he is. Oh, yes, he was dead once. God's Son, his only begotten Son, hung on high for all to see, like that little boy, for that little boy. At one time on his journey to the cross, he took the words of Psalm 42/43 on his lips. Remember how he said it in Gethsemane? "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death (Matt. 26:38)."

And oh, how his enemies mocked him. Where is your God now, Jesus? Remember how the leaders of God's chosen people mocked him on the cross? "He saved others, but he can't save himself! He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God!'" (Matt. 27-39-43) Hey Jesus, hey King of the Jews, where is your God now?

It was a total, humiliating defeat for the man who called himself the Son of God. That's what his enemies thought. That's what even his disciples thought. He's dead. And maybe God is, too. So, they buried him and went away with downcast souls and disturbed minds. We had hoped, but hope has died with Jesus.

But then the women, those blessed loving women went looking for him where they had seen him laid. And he wasn't there. But an angel was. And the angel said, "He is not here, he has risen. Come and see. And tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him (Matthew 28:5-7)." He is not here where you expected to find him, in the grave. He has risen and he has gone elsewhere, ahead of you, to Galilee, to new places, to new life, to new challenges and opportunities, to a world changed by a cross and an empty tomb.

It was all part of God's plan to save a world dying of thirst for the living God. And people gulped down the Good News like panting deer. After the first sermon, 3000 parched people drank and were saved. When Peter and John healed a crippled beggar, everyone was amazed. But then the trouble started. Peter and John were arrested, imprisoned, and warned to never again speak about Jesus. Upon their release, they raced off to a prayer meeting. And what they pray reveals the secret of where God is when suffering hits our lives.

Acts 4:24 says, "Sovereign Lord, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." They succeeded, and Jesus died. But now listen to what these early believers prayed next. Referring to the murderers of Jesus, they pray this. "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." The death of Jesus was at the heart of God's sovereign plan to save a world dying of thirst for the living God. Where is your God? On the cross.

No, not on that old rugged cross anymore. He was hauled down and laid in the grave. But he is not there; he is risen. Now you will find him wherever human suffering and divine sovereignty cross. Where is your God today? At the intersection of suffering and sovereignty. Do you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 25 just before he died? He spoke of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the poor, the sick and the prisoner. And he said a thing so shocking that we can barely believe it. "Whatever you did for one of least of these brothers and sisters of

mine, you did for me.” Where is your God, the crucified one? Down there in the suffering places with the suffering people of the earth.

But not just down there in the gutter, also up there on the throne. Do you remember how Paul said it in Ephesians 1:20-22? Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God and now “he is seated at God’s right hand... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion....” Where is your God, the crucified one? Up there, on the throne in sovereign control of everything, says Ephesians 1:23, “for the church.”

Where is our God? At the intersection of suffering and sovereignty, wherever God’s sovereignty meets human suffering, wherever our Father uses suffering to save his children, as he did on the cross of Christ. As it was at Calvary, the places God seems most absent are the places God is most present. Wherever we cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” that is where God’s sovereign grace is at work to save us. “Yes, that’s hard to believe, when we can’t see him or hear him or touch him. How can we know that’s true?

Well, we would never know that if it weren’t for the one place on earth where we can see and hear and touch the Body of Christ, namely, the church. Jesus said, “Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” And when Jesus scattered the church out into the world to bring the living water to people dying of thirst, he assured them, “I am with you always to the end of the age.” Where is your God, the crucified, risen, reigning God? Right here, in the midst of those who gather for worship around a cross.

But the Body of Christ is broken, and we are often discouraged about the mess in the church. That’s why we need the prayer at the heart of Psalm 42/43. “Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.” For the Jews, that meant Mount Zion, the place where God dwelt in the temple. For us, that means Mount Calvary, the place where God died so that we could dwell with God always. And it is the Mount of Olives, the place from which Jesus ascended to take the throne and become the Lord of all. O Lord, send forth the Truth of the Gospel and the light of the Spirit, so that we can believe that God is always with us, wherever there is a cross, at the intersection of suffering and sovereignty.

I know, that’s a bit complicated. Let me make it so simple that a child can remember-- with four gestures. Point up, point down, point around, point at my heart. When the enemy asks that sneering question, “Where is your God?” you can answer, He is up there on the throne, and down there in the gutter, and right here in church. And by the grace of God, I hope you can add, “And he is in here, in my heart.” When God seems absent, we can shake our fists in rebellion or wring our hands in despair. Or we can take hold of the nail-pierced hand of God and say with the Psalmist. “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.”

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