

PREACH TO YOURSELF

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

May 26, 2024 AM Sermon

Psalm 42

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Tomorrow, of course, is Memorial Day. Many consider it the unofficial start to summer. Parades take place, the grill is dusted off for the season, people head to lakes and cottages. But it's more than that, or at least it should be. Memorial Day, originally known as Decoration Day, is a remembrance of soldiers who died in combat while risking their lives for their country. It's about gratitude, and it's about remembering.

Although placing flowers on graves is a very old tradition, the modern Memorial Day observances began back in 1865 with the end of the Civil War. Over the course of four years, more than 600,000 Americans, both from the North and the South, died in the fight over slavery. Following the war, the government established national cemeteries for the Union fallen, while other cemeteries were established in cities and towns across the country. With those cemeteries came mourners. They decorated graves. They recited prayers. They held tributes. They were determined to remember and not forget the price that had been paid during those four long, difficult years.

Difficult times are what we see in the life of this psalmist as well, although we do not know the specifics of his trouble. He speaks of not being able to go to the house of God in verse 4, of not being able to join in with the festive crowd that is headed there. Perhaps this is because of health issues. Perhaps it's because he has become isolated from them for an apparent misdeed. Perhaps it's because he's feeling too depressed to join the festive throng.

Whatever the case, verse 3 tells us that he is in tears both night and day because of his challenges, and in verse 7 we read that when he listens to the crashing of the raging sea, he feels as if God's waves are sweeping directly over him. He imagines himself being engulfed by the current.

The image of water, or the lack of water, is also what we see at the beginning of Psalm 42. A deer is suffering from dehydration and literally panting for streams of water; not stale water, not stagnate water, but streams of water, water that is moving, healthy, and life-giving.

This Psalmist declares that just as that deer pants for water, so he, too, thirsts for the only thing that can quench his dryness, and that's God. And yet, the author of this Psalm feels that God is absent, that's he's gone off duty. He says in verse 2: "When can I go and meet with God?" And then in verse 9 he questions God directly: "Why have you forgotten me?" The questioning gets even a bit stronger in Psalm 43 when he asks God, "Why have you rejected me?" (verse 2).

Do you catch the irony in this? The psalmist is lamenting the apparent absence of God, but he's doing it in a prayer to God! The authors of many of the Psalms of lament, like this one, apparently saw no contradiction in expressing frustration over God's absence and saying so right to God's face.

The writer of this Psalm, however, is not the only one aware of God's apparent silence. His enemies and naysayers notice it, too, and they use it to taunt him in verses 3 and 10. "Where is your God, pal? How come he's not coming through for you? Why is he not listening to your cries?" Those mocking him are perhaps cynics, agnostics, or even atheists. Whatever the case, they are ridiculing him all day long, so much so that he feels like his bones are breaking under their pressure.

We can all feel like we are under pressure at times in our lives, times when we are led to question whether God is there in the midst of our circumstances. Such was the case for Jamie and Vanessa Strickland, a couple from Hamilton, Ontario. She called him at church one day, where he served as one of the pastors. "Jamie," she said on the phone, "can you come home right away? I heard there was a boy hit by a car while crossing the street coming home from school, and Jude isn't home yet."

He immediately finished up what he was doing, asked a few people in the church office to pray, and then drove home. As he drove, many thoughts raced through his mind. He wasn't sure Jude was the one who was hit, but he had a sickening feeling in his stomach that his life was about to change. Tragically, it was their 11-year-old son who was struck by a pick-up truck that day. He died 33 hours later at an area hospital. What

started as a normal Tuesday morning shoveling snow with his four sons before school, turned into a day of absolute devastation.

How do you go on in life, Jamie wondered, when something like this happens? How do you move forward as a husband, a dad, and even as a minister? There is no training that can prepare you for this.

Many people expressed to them that it was a tragedy that Jude didn't get to live a full life. And humanly speaking, this was true. His family did not get to see him graduate from high school, get his first job, get married, or become a father.

As Jamie writes, "When I go through a wave of grief, my thoughts can get very dark. There are things that I begin to think in my despair that I would never think about during good times. These are thoughts and questions that I usually do not feel comfortable sharing with people."

Perhaps Jamie's questions are similar to what we find in Psalms 42 and 43: Where are you, God? Why have you forgotten and rejected our family? Why must we go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy of grief?

There are some here in the sanctuary this morning or perhaps watching online who understand the experience of the Strickland family, for you know the grief that comes from the death of a son or daughter and how hard that is. For others, grief comes in different forms: the death of a spouse or parent, the ending of a marriage, the loss of a job, the diagnosis of a disease, like cancer, Parkinson's, or dementia, that gradually brings an end to good health and independent living. Those who have or currently are experiencing such circumstances may feel like crying out: where are you, God? Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

While still feeling oppressed by the enemy, the Psalmist is led by God's Spirit to do something perhaps somewhat unusual; he talks to himself. We might even say he begins to preach to himself, using the same words on three separate occasions within these two Psalms. Why, my soul, are you discouraged? Why are you so sad? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Too often, especially in times of despair, we place our hope in the wrong places. We may trust in our wealth and finances to see us through. We may trust in our career to give us true satisfaction. We may trust in certain political candidates to hopefully bring an end to all the woes in our land. We may even place our trust and hope in leaders in the church, hoping them to be the perfect examples for us to follow. All of these are things and people, however, that can easily disappoint us.

And when we get discouraged, we listen to the fearful speculations of our hearts: "What if this happens? What if that happens? Maybe it's because of this! Maybe it's because of that!" Author, Tim Keller, says about these verses, "Here instead we see the psalmist not merely listening to his troubled heart but addressing it, taking his soul in hand so to speak, and saying, 'Remember this, O soul!'" And what does the psalmist remember? He remembers the source of true hope, hope that will not disappoint.

He remembers, as we read in verse 2, that God is the living God. He remembers (verse 9) that God is the Rock, a place, a crag in the stone, where he can find protection from his enemies. He remembers (verse 8) that God is the one who gives life. And in the companion Psalm, Psalm 43, he remembers that God is a stronghold (verse 2) and the source of all joy, even ecstatic joy (verse 4).

Perhaps the strongest image that he remembers about God comes in Psalm 42:8, where he says that the Lord pours out his unfailing love, his hesed, upon him each day, and in describing that, he addresses God in a more personal way, using the name Yahweh or Lord.

When the psalmist does this work of remembering, by the leading of God's Spirit, his spirits begin to rise. We can imagine the refrain growing in strength each time he says it, and when we get to the final one, at the end of Psalm 43, we can hear it ring with confidence: Why, my soul, are you discouraged? Why are you so sad? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

This hope that does not disappoint is what brought comfort and strength to the Strickland family after the tragic death of Jude. At the funeral service, they read from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and especially noted verse 13, which says: "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."

As Jamie reflected on the experience, he wrote: "As Christians, it is true that we don't grieve as those who have no hope because of Jesus' victory over the grave. However, what is it about being a Christian that

allows us to handle challenging times differently than the rest of the world? How is our experience of grief and tragedy different than those who do not know Christ?

For Jamie and his family, they began to cling to words from the Psalms, especially Psalm 139:7-11, where the Psalmist reminds us that wherever we go, God's right hand will hold us fast. In other words, God will hold onto us firmly no matter what happens. At times Jamie said he felt like he didn't have it within him to keep going in life, but when he preached the words of that Psalm to himself, he was reminded that though he continued to grieve and mourn, it was God who keeps us going; he is the one who holds us fast.

Dear friends, what passage does God's Spirit bring to mind when you need to "preach" to yourself? If you're feeling that God is distant or absent, perhaps it's Psalm 42 or Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble." If you're doubting God's power or ability to handle the situation in which you find yourself, maybe you need Psalm 86:10: "You are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God." And if you or a loved one is staring death in the face and you are already beginning to mourn, you may need the familiar words of Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The mourners who flocked to cemeteries after the Civil War came to bring and plant flowers so they would remember the tremendous price that was paid to provide freedom for all in this country. May God empower us to plant as well, to plant his truth in our hearts and minds so that we, too, will remember; remember the hope that does not fail even in the most challenging times of life, the hope that was secured by the greatest sacrifice of all time, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Put your hope in God, the Psalmist proclaims to himself and to us, for we shall continue to praise him, our Savior and our God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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