

Psalms 2, 42-43:

“Why do the nations rage” and “As the deer pants”

Psalm 2

1. This psalm is composed of four stanzas. Who speaks in each stanza?
2. Who is addressed? Who has Provoked God’s terrifying wrath? What are the “cords” and “bonds” of v. 3?
3. What is the tone of this psalm? Is it a (a) hymn of praise; (b) prophecy of future events; (c) description of God’s wisdom; (d) lament; (e) warning; (f) prayer of thanksgiving; (g) something else?
4. Many see this psalm as the complement to psalm 1, which itself provides an introduction to the psalms as a whole. How do these belong together?
5. How is this psalm read as prophecy in Acts 4:23-31? Who are the “nations” and the “peoples” in the reading of Acts, and what did they do to earn God’s wrath? How do Heb 13:3 and Rom 1:4 use this psalm?
6. As Christians we know that God “so loved the world” that he sent his Son to die to reconcile us to him. We also read in the OT that God is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6, Num 14:18, Ps 86:15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13), and “ready to forgive” (Neh 9:17) and “ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2). When Jesus says that we must forgive “not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22)—that is, we must never cease to forgive—we trust God isn’t asking for greater forgiveness than he himself offers. However, “slow to anger” does not mean “never angry.” Kidner writes,

The quick anger may sound like the touchiness of a despot, but the true comparison is with Christ, whose wrath (like his compassion) blazed up at wrongs which left His contemporaries quite unruffled. This fiery picture is needed alongside that of the one who is ‘slow to anger’, just as the laughter of verse 4 balances the tears of, e.g., Isa 16:9 or 63:9. That is, God’s patience is not placidity, any more than His fierce anger is loss of control, His laughter cruelty or His pity sentimentality. When His moment comes for judgment, in any given case, it will be by definition beyond appeasing or postponing.

Is this a cop-out? What makes you think that those sins which no one else sees but which you cherish too much to relinquish won’t eventually make God at least a little bit angry? After all, “God cannot be mocked” (Gal 6:7).¹

Psalms 42-43

“Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.” (Isaiah 45:15)

1. When reading the psalms, always look for imagery and parallel structure:
 - a. What structure do you find in this psalm? Is there repetition? Can you identify a refrain?
 - b. There are two particularly striking examples of imagery: In v. 1 we read of a deer. This is not the happy “hind’s feet are on high places” (Heb 3:19), but a deer parched, exhausted and harried by dangers. What picture is painted later, in 42:7?

¹ But see also 1 Thess 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10; Rom 5:9.

2. The water imagery (42:7) is apt for spiritual depression. In this state you can feel as if you are barely keeping your head above choppy waters while no one even notices. At other times you might feel like you are fathoms down in the deep, the light a tiny point shimmering distantly overhead, the cold sapping your energy and leaving you immobile.
 - a. What sort of depression do you sense in these psalms?
 - b. The psalm includes other images: the words of his enemies are like the “*shattering of my bones*” (42:10, NASB); he *feeds on his tears* (42:3) as he *pours out his soul* (42:4). What image best describes those times when you have felt far from God?
3. What are the opponents guilty of in this psalm?
4. What person or persons are addressed in these psalms? List the things the writer asks God for in this psalm.
5. If it’s important that the psalmist talks to God (or the space where God used to be) when in this spiritual pit (42:7,9, 43:1-4), and talks to others who may have experienced the same thing (42:2-4, 8), it’s just as important that he talks to himself:

The main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self ... Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man’s treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself . . . “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: “Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.” Do you know what I mean? If you do not, you have had but little experience... We must stand up as this man did and say: “Why are you cast down? Why are you disquieted within me?” ... instead of listening passively to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you. For that is what he will always do if you allow him to be in control. [D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 20-1.]

This psalm shows us the value, when facing spiritual confusion (God loves me, so why has he left me alone?) of turning to our own stories (modeled in Ps 40:1-3) and those of the people of God (modeled in Ps 44:1-3; cf Rom 15:4). At times like these when doubts (42:9) and doubters (42:3b, 10) aggressively assault us we must be just as aggressive in recounting God’s promises (*read*: Rom 8:32; Heb 13:5; 1 Peter 5:10-11, Ps 66); in the words of the psalm, “my soul is downcast... *therefore I remember you*” (42:6). When you feel spiritually disoriented or far from God, what stories or passages help you?

6. The psalmist recalls, whether with pain or longing, times when he had led the assembly in joyful worship. Where else is worship in these psalms? Is it solitary or worship with others? Is it the cause or effect of his recovery?

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Fun fact: Psalm 72:7, “In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more,” as well as the entirety of Psalm 8, are among the messages inscribed on a small, gray silicon disk about the size of a fifty-cent piece placed on the moon by the astronauts of the Apollo 11 mission.

Leader's Notes

Psalm 2:

- Kings were regarded often as sons of a god (see IVP BBC).
- “Set” in v. 6 is a word associated with the installment of the leader.
- “Break” in v. 9 is, in the LXX, “rule”, which seems like a more natural reading of the text.
- “Kiss his feet” in v. 12 is better read “kiss sincerely” (Kidner, 53).
- Some pagan kings would at their inauguration write the names of their enemies on pots and smash them (IVP BBC).

Reading each psalm is like walking into a room where there's a conversation going on, and you don't know ahead of time what sort of conversation you'll find. Sometimes it's a conversation between lovers. Sometimes it's a wise old woman giving a lecture on practical living. Sometimes one person is pleading with the other for help, tears in his eyes. In tonight's psalm we walk into a room to find a friend of ours on the verge of blows with someone else. We don't know at first the cause of this hostility, only that cold warnings and anger hang in the air and neither's backing down.

Psalm 2 is interesting both because it expresses a side of God we are uncomfortable with, and because of the way it's used in the NT. We walk into a dark, cold room thick with hostility, and our instinct is to be repulsed, to assume that all parties are innocent because we don't know the situation. So part of the challenge of this psalm is remembering that the one uttering the warnings, the one with anger etched on his face, is our friend, a friend who we know to be incredibly patient—and also a friend who rightfully wields authority. With that in mind, let's read Psalm 2...

Psalms 42-43:

These psalms are clearly part of the same psalm, and should be read as one. They presents us with a case of spiritual depression. As is typical of the psalms we don't know the exact context, but there are clues: The sons of Korah were Levites in charge of leading temple worship. And an allusion is made in verse 6 to the author being up in the north of Palestine, far from the temple. And physically distant he is also emotionally distant: we learn right away that he has lost all sense of God's presence.

Martin Luther, who was such a powerful pioneer of the faith, was many times beset by intense spiritual blackness, and referred to God at these times as the “hidden God,” the deus absconditus.

The most basic thing these psalms say is that believers will face times when they face spiritual depression. And the cruel truth is that often in these times the God who has sealed us as his own might as well be in another galaxy. We are alone when we most could use a comforting presence. We read in the NT about the peace that passes understanding, and read in the devotional literature about the joy which is a fruit of the Spirit and characterizes centered, healthy believers, and we wonder what's wrong with us. Don't we trust God? Are we really doubting such basic things? These are times of deep spiritual confusion and disorientation, and believers who don't have a category for spiritual depression as part of a healthy Christian life have a gaping vulnerability.

Those who have been through this know there's no one passage which makes it go away. What this psalm offers us isn't a magic pill, but the therapy we need to come out the other side stronger, not as the walking wounded.