

Why are you downcast?

Psalm 42

Introduction

Like many Psalms, it is impossible to find out why the Psalmist wrote this Psalm. Yet this Psalm went on to become part of the world's greatest prayer book. The Psalm had an origin but more importantly contains timeless religious truth. The Psalms speak about the God we worship and the heart of the worshipper.

I would categorise the Psalm we are looking at today as a Psalm of disorientation, that is in the very early stages of reorientation. Things are not going well for the Psalmist but there is a distant light on the horizon.

As the deer

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you O God. (vs 2)

The Psalmist offers a picture to explain his feeling - you can easily visualise a beautiful wild deer standing over the dry brook - desperately wondering where the water had gone. For a moment the deer is transfixed on the absence of water. It must find water if it is to survive.

'The imagery is very striking. God is the basic nourishment of the Psalmist'. *Adele Berlin in the Jewish study bible comments.*

Believers have used numerous images to describe the sense of God's absence, thirst, darkness, the desert. All lead us back to the simple truth that when God is experienced as absent, we feel an intense longing, pining even. The world may be in the state that it is in today because it hasn't recognised the importance of heartfelt belief in God. We try to compensate for our creator's presumed absence by fulfilling our own desires. This leads to misery, because ultimately, we cannot be happy without a relationship with the God who created us and loves us.

Why are you downcast?

You might be encouraged to know that the Psalmists are questioning types. The week before last, Ian helpfully explored Psalm 22. This begins with a desperate question, 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me?' Today's questions is framed a little differently, rather than asking God, the Psalmist is talking to himself. Calvin suggests that the Psalmist 'represents himself as if he formed two opposing parties'. I think we all understand what the Psalmist is doing, and how Calvin describes this.

I talk to myself sometimes. I remember one time when I was struggling many years ago, my dad simply told that 'you've got to dig deep'. Now when I feel that I'm struggling I say to myself 'you've got to dig deep'. Throughout the last ten years and more my dad has certainly practiced what he preached.

Here the Psalmist isn't simply encouraging himself, which is right and fitting, he is offering himself divine counsel. The reason for the counsel is that there is hope. The hope might be distant, the thirst excruciating, but to carry on its vital that the Psalmist sees the distant hope on the horizon.

Hope in God

As Jesus reflected on his approaching passion, there are echoes of this Psalm, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal Jesus said,

'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' (Matthew 26:38 NIV)

And in John as Jesus gathered with his disciples for their final meal he said

'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. (John 12:26 NIV)

Jesus knew the language of the Psalmist and used it within his trouble and suffering. It is right and proper for us to do the same when we feel life heavy upon us; it's right and Christlike for us to echo the Psalmist words within our own life.

Why are you downcast O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me
'Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my saviour and my God' (vs 11)

Conclusion

It is right for us to put our hope in God, after all we believe that God is our all in all, the sustenance and the one who sustains our lives. When life is tough, we need God all the more and at these times the sense of God's hiddenness is very disconcerting. Nevertheless, we must go on in hope that, like our Lord and Saviour Jesus, we too will travel through the disturbances of life in the sure and certain hope that the light on the horizon will one day beam God's love fully upon us.

Questions

1. What is it about God that causes you to long for him?
2. Can you think of times in your life where you have had to dig deep to get through?
3. What things help you to put your hope in God?