



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

“Vindicate Me, O God”

Psalms 42–43

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Introduction

I invite you to look with me at the song I suspect some thought we would sing, based on the text selected, but which I specifically asked that we *not* sing. I refer, of course, to the hymn, “As the Deer.” When we look at it alongside Psalm 42, we rightly ask whether it is really a setting of the psalm or merely a hymn that uses a phrase from the psalm as the launching place for a different point. That question in turn leads us to another: if Psalm 42 does not constitute the setting for the hymn, what is the psalm about?

- The longing in the figure of a deer panting for water sets the stage for the confession of one who is frustrating in seeking God and being in his presence (Ps 42.1–2).
- Instead, he has spent “day and night” in despair, sustained by tears, pouring out his soul while remembering past times he would go with the people into the house of God and join in praise at one of the festivals (vv. 3–4).
- He then asks his soul why it is cast down within him and again recalls memories of times he was closer to God (vv. 5–8).
- Why, he asks, has God forgotten him? Why does his enemy’s oppression continue? Why can he wound and taunt him, asking him, “Where is your God?” (vv. 9–10).
- The psalm concludes by repeating the refrain introduced in verse 5 (v. 11).

Again, that doesn’t fit the sentiment of the hymn, “As the Deer.” So, what is going on here? The answer is that Psalm 42 is an example of a *lament*, one of about fifty in Psalms (scholars differ on the exact number, but most put it around fifty). There are two types, communal and individual. Psalms 42–43, which comprise one poem, exemplify the second. As we continue these introductory studies of Psalms, we’ll notice several of these, for reasons I’ll highlight below.

Form and Purpose

Although not all include all the features—and not all who have analyzed them use the same terminology to describe them—the lament psalms have a generally discernable form comprised of several typical components.

- First, there is a first-person invocation and plea in which God is *addressed boldly*; we might even say he is *confronted*.
- Second, the one in pain lodges a *complaint* about a specific situation of trouble. This expression of acute distress over something that is not as it should be often includes an accusation about being betrayed, whether by another person or God himself. Indeed, the complaint *against God* is a vital element of the lament.
- Third, there is a *petition*—an *appeal*—to God to intervene to resolve the trouble. It is important to see that these petitions mean little apart from the complaint and urgency associated with them.
- Fourth, there is commonly *an affirmation of trust in God*, often expressed in terms of recalling his prior saving acts. The one voicing the lament is confident God has heard his complaint and will take action to positively transform his circumstances.
- Fifth, laments typically conclude with an expression of *praise to God*.¹ This transforms the complaint from a rant to a plea grounded in trust. This trait again calls attention to the importance of the covenant relationship to legitimize the lament as a bold approach to God, demonstrating both belief that he is an active participant in the relationship and that he can “take it.” The psalmist reaffirms his belief that God can—and will—act in accordance with his will and promises.²

The lament’s purpose varies; a precise statement must be derived from what the lament says. Sometimes the individual or community express bewilderment and frustration over a crisis, the origin or cause of which they cannot understand. At other times, they are expressing their sense of separation from God—either because of a low point in their lives (illness or other crisis) or, as in Psalm 51, because of something they had done to break relationship.

Psalm 42–43: A Three-Part Lament

Though listed separately in our Bibles, it is quickly evident from the recurring refrain that these psalms function as one (42.5, 11; 43.5). The result is a poem consisting of three stanzas.

Psalm 42.1–5 comprise stanza 1, expressing a deep depression. The psalmist longs for God because he sees himself as having been separated from God. Though he would love to again lead the procession into the temple for a festival, he is left with only memories of such days. So, “like the braying of a deer” at finding a dry creek bed, he feeds on his tears, enduring taunts from those who wonder why his God has not delivered him (Mays 1994, 173).

¹ Psalm 88 is the notable exception to the typical arrangement, lacking explicit affirmations of both trust and praise. Instead, it is entirely devoted to crying out for God to hear and respond to the psalmist’s complaint. But, while it lacks “a ray of sunshine” and contains “no explicit statement of confidence, there is an implicit confidence . . . in 6 and 14: the song confesses that it is God who has brought these troubles, implying that relief is also in God’s hand. Further, there is insistent appeal to God (v. 1, ‘day and night’; v. 9, ‘every day’; v. 13, ‘in the morning’): the psalm instills a tough faith in its singers by reminding them to keep turning to God (the ‘God of my salvation,’ v. 1), even during these times when it seems that there is no answer being given” (Collins 2008, 1048).

² The five structural components discussed here are adapted from Limburg 1992, 532. Hicks 2005, 70, cites the eight-part structure presented by Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., 1992, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and Ancient Near East*, SBL Dissertation Series 127 (Atlanta: Scholars Press), 80-100. These structures are not absolute. Not every lament psalm contains all the components, and some lament psalms elaborate more on some of them than others.

Psalm 42.6–11 go deeper into the ideas of verses 1–5. The geographical references in verse 6 may reflect the psalmist’s location when he writes but are more likely metaphorical to describe the distance he feels from God: the places mentioned are about as far from the temple as one could get in Israel.

The figures he uses to depict his troubles are more pronounced than the ones used in verses 1–5. He describes them in terms of the deeps, the rough waters (and their noise), and the overwhelming breakers and waves (v. 7). Also more intense are the references to the taunting and sense of distance from God.

Thus, the refrain in verse 11, repeated from verse 5, is more plaintive. The taunts and travails are seen as evidence that God is not near; perhaps he has forgotten. In theory, the psalmist knows this is not true, but he cannot feel God’s presence.

Psalm 43.1–5 casts the cares of Psalm 42 on God. Verses 1–2 cry from the depths of despair, lamenting the utter deceit and injustice of his ungodly enemies. But in verses 3–4 the mood becomes more positive (see the lament structure described above). There is a request for light and truth along with the expectation of worship. The refrain, repeated in verse 5 from 42.5, 11, is now seen in its completeness, not as a cry of despair, but as the answer to it: hope in God who is salvation and worthy of praise.

*Benefits of Lament*³

Though some shy away from the idea that laments can have value,⁴ their inclusion in Scripture alerts us to the likelihood that reading and engaging in lament can be beneficial. I’ll mention just three benefits here.

First, laments can teach us the importance of an honest relationship with God. With regard to *relationship*, the existence and depth of our relationship with God is evident in a lament, being of a nature wherein we understand we can vent our frustrations to him. This goes beyond being a casual churchgoer.

Notice, too, that the relationship is *honest*. Laments express what many consider to be “negative” emotions, things many been taught (either explicitly or because it’s just understood) “you just don’t say in church.” In fact, when we study Scripture carefully, we find it is generally more honest with God than many were taught we could be. That’s exactly what we would

³ In this section, I am drawing from notes from two lectures by Jim Roberts, “Using Lamentations and Selected Psalms of Lament in Preaching and Ministry.” These lectures were presented as part of the Sermon Seminar at the Austin Graduate School of Theology (Austin, TX), May 21-22, 2007.

⁴ Regarding the complaint aspect of the laments, Mark Shipp wrote, “I recently had a discussion with someone who informed me that the lament psalms were composed by a ‘bunch of whiners.’ We are also told from the time we are young that we should not complain. The perception many have about lament psalms is that they are inappropriate and faithless whining, since we are the people who live A.D., not B.C., and should be characterized by praise. To tell someone ‘You should not lament’ strikes me as strange as a father telling an injured child, ‘Stop that crying! It’s not right!’ Believers are not special because they lament—everyone laments. What is different about the believer’s lament is that it is addressed to the Lord. It is our faithful cry to our Father, when all we have left to offer is our lament. To fail to bring our laments to the Lord, on the other hand, is faithless” (Shipp 2012, 52-53).

See also Hicks 2005, 69, who notes that, “even in our post-9/11 era,” the church tends to engage in a nearly universal quest to make community worship exclusively “upbeat, perky, positive, and celebrative. We leave little room for songs [or prayers and sermons, DA] that express the misery of life because, for the most part, we are communally disconnected from misery.”

expect; if we are going to claim the promise of boldness in coming before God (cf. Heb 10.19–22), we should understand it can and should include honest expression of frustration. We should also note that such expressions are, implicitly at least, praise since they imply we believe in a God capable of handling our anger and problems.

Second, lament can strengthen our relationship with God. Because sin and the need to acknowledge it have been emphasized more, we are generally more comfortable with the language of guilt and confession. We are often less comfortable with voicing our frustration that God also has a commitment to us that we sometimes wonder about. This can have a direct effect on our prayer lives, for if we can't say what we really think and feel in prayer, how long are we going to pray? After a while, saying someone else's words wears thin. To say it another way, when we understand and begin to express ourselves in terms of lament when it is appropriate, we are taking God and his word more seriously, reflecting in our lives *all* that God's word demonstrates and permits.

Third, being willing to lament can also deepen our worship. To fully appreciate this point, we need to come to terms with the current tendency to make our worship "upbeat, perky, positive, and celebrative" (Hicks 2005, 69). The lament psalms—and other lament texts (e.g., Hab 3)—force us to ask, if only happy songs should be sung in church, why are there so many psalms of lament?

The communal laments in the Psalms take the totality of life into account in a way always upbeat, perky, and celebrative worship does not. Sometimes, what we need in our times of worship is not to be "cheered up," but helped to express our frustrations. Admittedly, this is a challenge for those who lead our worship because of the variety of experiences and moods represented in our services. But that variety also implies that we should acknowledge that not everyone always feels like celebrating.

More broadly, making room for communal lament encourages us to acknowledge and find ways to express the full range of emotions in our worship, in ways that are both appropriate and biblical. Making the effort not only helps parts of the body cope with difficulties and the feelings that accompany them, it can also help those who are not having those experiences become more empathetic.

Conclusion

The refrain that is repeated in Psalm 42.5, 11; 43.5 goes the heart of what we often need: renewal of hope while experiencing the depths of despair.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

So, let us read the lament psalms honestly with a goal of incorporating their sentiments in our lives.

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Works Cited

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